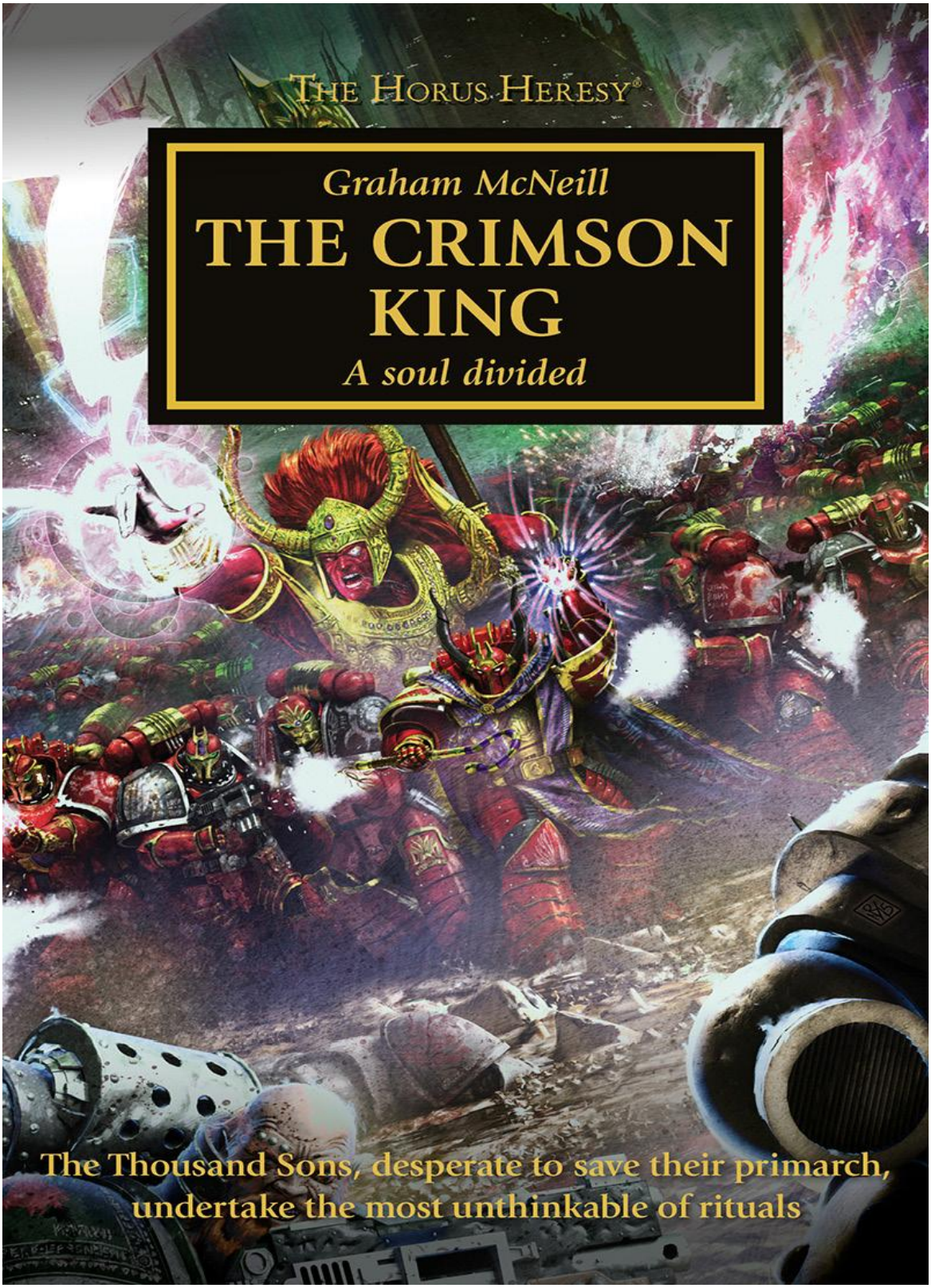
THE HORUS HERESY®
Graham McNeill
THE CRIMSON KING
A soul divided
The Thousand Sons, desperate to save their primarch, undertake the most unthinkable of rituals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THE HORUS HERESY®

Graham McNeill

THE CRIMSON KING

A soul divided

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The Primarchs

MAGNUS THE RED, Primarch of the Thousand Sons

LORGAR, Primarch of the Word Bearers

The XV Legion, 'Thousand Sons'

AHZEK AHRIMAN, Chief Librarian

AMON, Equerry to the primarch

HATHOR MAAT, Adept of the Pavoni

SOBEK, Equerry to Ahriman

MENKAURA, Adept of the Corvidae

SANAKHT, Adept of the Athanaean

TOLBEK, Adept of the Pyrae

IGNIS, Adept of the Order of Ruin

The *VI Legion, 'Space Wolves'*

BÖDVAR BJARKI, Rune Priest of Tra

SVAFNIR RACKWULF, Woe-maker of Tra

OLGYR WIDDOWSYN, Shield bearer

GIERLOTHNIR HELBLIND, Shield bearer

HARR BALEGYR, Berserker

Imperial Personae

MALCADOR, The Sigillite, Regent of Terra

YASU NAGASENA, Chosen, the Hound of Malcador

DIO PROMUS, Knight Errant, former Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines

ANTAKA CYVAAN, Former Librarian of the Raven Guard

UMWELT UEXKÜLL, Cybertheurgist, Taghmata Omnissiah

Credence Araxe, Mechanicum magos, Master of Ursarax

Zygman Videns, Mechanicum magos, statistical prognosticator

V indicatrix, Vorax-class battle-automata

Caesaria Laventure, Warden of Kamiti Sona

Lady Veleda, Cartomancer

Jambik Sosruko, Migou, son of Lady Veleda

Lemuel Gaumon, Former remembrancer

Camille Shivani, Former remembrancer

Chaiya Parvati, Survivor of Prospero

One evening an outcast gothi arrived at the aett of the Ascommani. The arrival of a raven-seer was a sign of coming bad stars, but the chief knew better than to turn him away. He brought him to his hearth fire and broke marrow with him. And in return, the gothi told the aett-chief of a battle fought within the heart of every warrior of the ice-born.

He said, 'Listen well, lord of the aett – this battle is fought between two wolves inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, love, hope, serenity, humility, benevolence, empathy, truth, compassion, and faith.'

The Ascommani chief thought on this for a full passage of the moon. And when the shadows fled and the sun turned the pack ice to glass, he asked, 'Which wolf wins?'

The gothi simply replied, 'The one you feed.'

– from Ahmad Ibn Rustah's
The Upplander's Tale (unpublished)

Time has run out.

Night falls on the Imperium, but this New Night will not be an age of darkness. It will be one of pitiless illumination, blazing with the pyres of mankind's doom. Such fearful radiance makes two warring shadows in every soul. The darkness of the tyrant wrestles the light of the liberator, and by such struggles are the true measure of heroes reckoned.

What of myself?

Am I good*?*

I believe *I am, but how much stock can I put in* belief*?*

Between Malcador's questions and Dorn's demands I walk the shores of the subterranean lake beyond this villa – a structure clearly intended for a being of my scale – and see my reflection in its dark waters.

But is the copper-skinned visage looking back truly me?

This question has occupied a great deal of my time since the breaking open of the golden doors and my attempts to undo the damage I caused.

It is an aspect of me, of Magnus.

This at least seems certain.

A good aspect, I like to think – perhaps the best. The face that meets my gaze is one that knows just the right measure of pride, nobility and intelligence. It is a soul tempered with the understanding that there is always more to learn, always someone cleverer.

I have come to realise it is but one of many aspects of Magnus the Red.

Like a statue cast upon the ground, my subtle body was broken into shards by the Wolf King and scattered on the tides of the Great Ocean. Do the other fragments of the Crimson King think of themselves as I do? Are they even aware of the existence of others? Or do they fancy themselves alone, and, by such force of narrative gravity, does each believe itself to be pre-eminent?

Perhaps, but surely all must concede that he who dwells atop the cyclopean tower on that unnameable world within the empyrean is the whole from which we were split.

Lofty questions with no easy answers, but I have little else to occupy my mind as I sit alone on this frigid lakeshore and contemplate the path that has led me to

this point.

Such introspection always leads me back to Horus.

Though my brother has become something monstrous and utterly inhuman, I long for a sight of him. I long for the stars overhead instead of kilometres-thick layers of bioluminescent rock. I long for the comforting reality of an age when the universe made sense.

But as it becomes ever more difficult to separate reality from fantasy, I grow less sure every day there is even a difference.

We perceive reality through a veil.

We imagine we enforce rigorous standards upon our beliefs, telling ourselves to accept only what we have proven beyond doubt. This is wilful self-deceit. The wider our view of the universe becomes, the more our beliefs must *come to us second-hand. Our reliance on higher authorities forms almost every aspect of our world view.*

I belabour this point to ensure there is no misunderstanding as to why we of the Thousand Sons believed we knew the truth of reality.

We believed it because the Emperor told *us it was true.*

How naive that now seems.

It is easy to see why we believed Him.

My father wrought life from lifelessness, something from nothing. He willed the illusion of sentience to coalesce around implied centres of cognition that did not exist until he declared it so. A magnificent achievement, unheralded in all the annals of human endeavour.

But magnificence alone does not make one infallible.

Even memory, that most unreliable of narrators, is based on shared recollections. Actual truth is secondary to agreed *truth. I say these things so that when accounts are prepared that tell of this great conflict, you will know to armour your credulity with the notion that not all truths are created equal.*

But one truth I have found to be incontrovertible is this:

Old friends make the worst enemies.

PART ONE
THE WEIGHING OF THE HEART

ONE

Torquetum
Temelucha
Choose wisely

‘The horizon is wrong,’ said Hathor Maat, and Ahriman felt the psychic pressure of the Pavoni adept’s power as he altered his internal biology to better cope with the magnificent orbital’s disorientating perspectives.

‘In what way?’ asked Ahriman.

‘In the way that there isn’t one.’

That wasn’t exactly true, but Hathor Maat had a point. There *was* a horizon, just not one immediately recognisable as such.

The Torquetum was an open, latticework globe of nine interlocking rings in constant motion. The smallest was thirty-six kilometres in diameter, the largest fifty-four. Viewed through the oculus on the bridge of the *Khemet* it had seemed impossibly fragile, yet its dimensions were the equal of Calth’s orbital anchorages.

Matching speed and aspect, the hawk-winged Stormbird had borne the six Legion warriors to the edge of a glittering forest of warp vanes on the inner face of the Torquetum’s equinoctial ring.

Perspective made its structure taper as it arced overhead in a gentle upward slope before reaching its apex of curvature and reversing to descend behind them. Each ring’s curve was perfectly proportioned, and at the centre of the slowly rotating concentric arrangement was a bronzed sphere held fast by a connecting shaft running between two polar braces.

Transhuman biology combined with powered battleplate should have rendered the Legion warriors immune to vertigo, but the orbital’s incredible structure was doing its best to test that. Even Lucius of the Emperor’s Children and Sanakht of the Athanaeans, consummate bladesmen both, stepped cautiously.

Tolbek of the Pyrae was a coiled spring, his ascendant power simmering close to the surface. Ahriman’s Corvidae Practicus, Sobek, kept close to his master, doing his best to conceal his spatial discomfort.

Only Menkaura appeared unaffected, the venerable battle-seer revelling in their disquieting surroundings.

‘A magnificent structure,’ he said, as a crystal-and-bronze arrangement of oculus lenses, encrusted with psychic resonators, slid soundlessly through space a

thousand metres overhead.

Ahriman nodded and recited a Corvidae mantra, easing his consciousness into the lower enumerations. The churning sensation in his gut subsided only slightly.

'True,' he agreed, lifting his gaze to the vast maelstrom of warp energy filling the void beyond the Torquetum's wirework structure, 'but its masters have chosen to observe a uniquely dangerous phenomenon.'

'The Eye of Terror,' whispered Menkaura, the words echoing like a curse within Ahriman's helm.

'A name freighted with familiarity, though I cannot remember knowing it until recently.'

'Indeed,' said Menkaura. 'As though this area of space has always cleaved to the name and only now chooses to reveal it.'

'An interesting theory,' said Ahriman. 'Further discussion is perhaps best saved until our mission is complete.'

Though apparently open to the void, an integrity field larger than anything Ahriman had previously encountered maintained a breathable atmosphere within the Torquetum's rings and kept the full force of the Eye at bay. Every surface crackled with warp ghosts, flickering images at the corner of the eye that vanished as soon as they were noticed.

'The structure is misnamed,' said Sobek, sickly warp light reflecting on his helm's coppered visor. The crimson of his armour reminded Ahriman of sunsets reflecting from the Tizcan pyramids. The original ones, not the skeletal ruins scattered in the lightning-wracked deserts of their adopted refuge.

'How so?' said Tolbek, dropping to one knee and placing a palm on the metal deck plates. Blue flames sprang to life around his black gauntlet, slithering from his arm like questing snakes in search of prey.

Sobek waved his *heqa* staff, its ivory length topped by a mass of carven eyes. 'It more resembles a vast armillary sphere. A primitive heliocentric model of the celestial vault, with a spherical framework of rings representing astral longitudes and latitudes.'

Ahriman moved past his Practicus, kneeling at a five-metre-wide focus-aperture in the ring upon which they had landed. No matter that the equinoctial portion of the Torquetum was a kilometre wide and a hundred metres thick, it still felt absurdly fragile to be moving at speed through the void.

Perfectly framed within the aperture's lens was the bronzed sphere at the heart of the Torquetum. Exactly fifteen kilometres in diameter, the geocentric rings encircling it turned with artful grace.

Ahriman's eyes told him the globe was below him, but the knot of vertigo in his gut insisted he should be falling *upwards*.

‘So if this is an observatory, where are the observers?’ said Tolbek, extinguishing the flames enveloping his gauntlet. ‘We are here at the appointed site, and should not linger in open space where the dogs of Russ might catch our scent. We have not the strength to defend ourselves.’

The Pyrae had ever been the bluntest of psychic disciplines among the Legion, but with the inevitable turning of the Great Ocean, their Fellowship was now in ascendance. As the seersight of the Corvidae waned, the Pyrae’s strength waxed.

Yet for all Tolbek’s brusqueness, Ahriman had been wondering the same thing. The reply to their hail from the *Khemet* had been binaric only, no vox or pict.

A set of coordinates and a precise time.

Ahriman had a flash of premonition and rose to his feet as a seamless panel slid open in the curvature of the ring. A curiously angled set of steps was revealed – midnight-black marble with traceries of sapphire veins. Sanakht’s jackal and hawk blades flashed from their sheaths, glittering white and black. Lucius had his sword drawn fractionally faster, and his loathsome whip coiled in the air like a serpent.

‘Perhaps this is them?’ said Sobek.

Ahriman blinked away the disorientating impression that the steps within were somehow inverted as a group of figures wrought from chrome and jet emerged. Their heads were featureless ceramic ovoids with mercury-bright sigils glittering like brands at their centre. No two were alike, and Ahriman saw crude goetic echoes in their arrangement.

Names? Perhaps drawn from the seventy-two daemons evoked by the Scribe of Baphomet?

‘Ah, of course,’ said Menkaura, turning to Sanakht. ‘Your Athanaean’s inability to discern the thoughts behind the vox becomes clear.’

‘Robots?’ said Hathor Maat, casting his gaze over the porcelain-skulled automata. ‘They sent *robots?*’

Ahriman heard his sneer, an all too common reaction from the Pavoni adept since their harrowing on Prospero.

The automata advanced on the Thousand Sons, the smoothness of their movements telling of the love and craft that had gone into their creation. Such purity of purpose brought to mind the duel between Lucius and Sanakht, the instant before the scarred swordsman launched his final blow.

Ahriman’s seersight saw black flames within the automata.

He shook his head. ‘These are not robots.’

Yokai.

Ahriman recognised the sigil as a word form belonging to a long-vanished empire of Old Earth, a mythical creature of some kind, but its deeper meaning eluded him.

Atharva would have known. His abrasive Corvidae brother had been fascinated by the legends of the Dragon Nations. He would have told them everything there was to know of the yokai: etymological analysis of the name, folk tales and all manner of esoteric trivia. But Atharva had left the Legion decades ago to join the Crusader Host and was almost certainly incarcerated somewhere on Terra. Perhaps he was the lucky one, spared the humbling at the hands of the Wolves. The Thousand Sons wore the shame of their defeat like a shroud, and the Crimson King was yet to decree when their mourning would end.

Or if it ever would.

Hathor Maat had dismissed the nine yokai as robots, and the comparison was inescapable. Though crafted in imitation of perfected human anatomy, like the legendary king of the Myrmidons, their blue-steel forms were still undeniably mechanical. Slender-limbed and graceful, Ahriman saw implacable strength in their forms coupled to aetheric energies burning within each skull.

'If they're not robots, what are they?' asked Lucius, the warp energy within the yokai invisible to him.

'Perhaps something similar to the *goylem* of the Six Orders?' suggested Sobek.

'These are neither crude nor unshaped,' replied Ahriman.

'So much more than robots,' said Sanakht, his silver-faced death mask helm reflecting the automata's aetheric fire. 'More akin to tutelaries summoned into exquisite host bodies.'

'Tutelaries?' spat Tolbek, his hand tightening on the inlaid serpent-scale grip of his sword. The light of his helm lenses flickered with immaterial flame.

'What's a tutelary?' asked Lucius as his whip twitched in anticipation of violence.

Amon had counselled against allowing the Phoenician's warrior to be part of this venture. Ahriman and the primarch's equerry seldom agreed these days, yet on this they were in accord. But watching Lucius hack his way through the crystal forest to Sanakht's tower, Ahriman had seen how closely the hateful swordsman's fate was bound to theirs.

All the pieces matter.

'Warp entities,' said Menkaura. 'Boon companions, or so we believed, called from the Great Ocean to boost our powers, aid our divinations and shed light on the mysteries.'

'Let me guess, they turned on you?'

Menkaura nodded. 'Indeed they did. How did you know?'

'You can only keep a dog on a leash so long before it remembers it's a wolf,' said Lucius, the fingers on his sword hand flexing. 'Should we be worried?'

'I do not believe so,' said Ahriman, studying the *invocatus* formulae etched around the bright sigils. 'These are compelled to obedience where ours were

allowed to come and go as they pleased.'

'Then the Torquetum's observers show more caution then we ever did,' said Menkaura.

The yokai halted before the Thousand Sons, and Ahriman resisted the urge to rise into a more warlike enumeration. After Prospero, his natural inclination had turned from inquisition to suspicion. He awaited some form of communication. His armour could translate binaric quickly enough for legitimate conversation, but as he formed his words in the machine-cant of the Mechanicum, another figure emerged from the ring's structure.

Compact and with an economy of movement that put Sanakht to shame, she was swathed in a simple devotional robe of saffron, cinched at the waist by a black sash. Her face was open and ascetically androgynous, with a skull shaven bare save for a trio of braided scalp locks hanging down to the backs of her knees.

One eye was cataract-blind, the other swimming with colour, as though coated with a film of petrochemicals. A practitioner of the *artes* – one whose power was great, yet altered by immaterial energies.

The yokai parted and she bowed deeply.

'Greetings, travellers,' she said. 'I am Temelucha, Mistress of the Tartaruchi.'

Ahriman returned her bow. 'And I am Ahzek Ahriman–'

He almost added *proud son of Magnus the Red,* but settled instead for, 'a warrior of the Crimson King.'

Temelucha smiled, pretending not to notice his hesitation.

'My order knows of you and Magnus the Red,' she said. 'The Great Ocean echoes to your sire's name.'

Wary now, Ahriman hid his surprise and said, 'You know our purpose in coming here?'

Temelucha bowed again and gestured to the opening through which she and the yokai had emerged.

'The same reason that draws all travellers with questions to the Torquetum,' she said, her warp-sheened eye glittering with witch-fire. 'You seek answers from the Iron Oculus.'

Following Temelucha and the yokai through the portal, Ahriman felt a wrenching sense of dislocation, a bilious tremor in the belly, like a starship crashing from the Great Ocean. His auto-senses shrieked with static, distorting his every sense as its systems struggled to form an image in his visor.

A savage rush of vertigo slammed through Ahriman, and he gripped his heqa staff tightly. The need to vomit climbed his gullet, and he unsnapped the seals of his helm, tearing it from his gorget to draw in a sucking breath.

'Take a moment to balance your elements and the feeling will pass,' said Temelucha.

Ahriman nodded, not yet trusting he could speak without sounding like a fool. His thoughts were scattered like knucklebones in a casting, and he eased his mind into the ordered thought forms of the lower enumerations before opening his eyes.

The breath caught in his throat as he found himself at the centre of a glass platform adrift in an endlessly unfolding tesseract of crystalline stairways, rising and falling or intersecting at impossible angles, defying perspective like the mythical works of the Niderlanter Knight.

Distant figures endlessly climbed with weary steps, but skewed angles and dazzling reflections quickly obscured them. Ahriman shook off a curious melancholy at the sight and turned to his more immediate surroundings.

The platform was translucent and enneagonal, with one of the yokai at each of its edges. Their placement was that of the symbol of Thothmes, a potent ward to secure those within from scrying.

His companions surrounded him, all but Lucius similarly beset by the disorientating change in their surroundings. Sobek was on his knees, eyes wide and body taut as he struggled to remove his helmet.

+Sobek?+ said Ahriman in an urgent mind-pulse.

His Practicus nodded and used his eye-topped staff to push himself to his feet. Sobek's skin was pale and drawn, his flesh waxy.

+Sobek?+ repeated Ahriman. +Are you effective?+

+I am,+ confirmed Sobek, bending to retrieve his helm.

Ahriman turned from Sobek as Sanakht's voice whispered in his mind, hidden and subtle.

+Do you see? The inscriptions below our feet?+

Ahriman looked down. The depths of the glass was filled with coiled golden script, rippling as though viewed through water.

+Raptures?+ he managed. +I do not recognise them.+

+Look closer,+ pressed Sanakht.

Ahriman stretched out his will, attempting to impose a measure of solidity to the formulae swimming within the glass, but they resisted easy interpretation. He exhaled slowly and rose into the third enumeration, his clarity returning as his mind's eye picked out arrangements he *did* recognise.

+Athanaean constructions?+

+Variant rapture forms of those we use to craft phantasms in the minds of enemy warriors,+ replied Sanakht with an almost imperceptible nod. +Amid such impossible surroundings, we should not take even that which appears incontrovertibly real at face value.'

+Good advice,+ replied Ahriman, lifting his gaze to the edge of the platform and seeing vast processional stairs rise up before him, each step cohering the

exact instant his eyes beheld it.

Unlike the tessellated stairs surrounding them, these climbed arrow-straight for hundreds of metres towards a magnificent structure: an ornamented temple with a many-tiered tower of multiple upturned eaves. Its silver-and-jade pillared facade was monolithic, with a black gate of lacquered wood at its centre. Stone dragons stood watch at either end of its eaves, and once again Ahriman wished he'd shared Atharva's enthusiasms for the cultures of Old Earth.

'What is that?' asked Ahriman.

'It is the *Kyaung,* the Silver Pavilion, wherein dwells the Iron Oculus,' explained Temelucha. 'It is what you came for.'

That was truer than she knew, but Ahriman chose not to elaborate on the Crimson King's purpose in sending them here.

He nodded and said, 'We are ready.'

Ahriman climbed the stairs alongside Temelucha, looking to unmask the raptures the plaza below had wrought, but he could see nothing beyond the myriad shifting stairways and the looming temple. Great power had gone into the creation of this phantasmagoria, and Ahriman took a moment to study its presumed architect.

Temelucha's skin was sunless, her curious eye a sign of great control over her abilities. To have endured so obvious a mutation and its attendant consequences while retaining her humanity spoke volumes as to her strength of will.

Ahriman's warriors climbed behind him in echelon: Sobek, Hathor Maat and Sanakht to his left, Menkaura, Tolbek and Lucius to his right. The yokai flanked them, the warp entities bound to their mechanised bodies guttering like banked furnaces. Despite the tutelaries' betrayal, a shocking reversal that had gutted the Thousand Sons' defence of Prospero, Ahriman still missed Aaetpio's soothing presence.

'Might I ask a question?'

'Of course,' said Temelucha, 'but the Iron Oculus has the answers you seek. I fear I will be a poor substitute.'

'A modest answer,' said Ahriman with a short bow, 'but one I am disinclined to accept.'

Temelucha smiled. 'Ask and I will endeavour to answer.'

'You said you were the Mistress of the Tartaruchi,' said Ahriman, gesturing to the temple above. 'The name implies a role of guardianship.'

'You have read the Akhmim Gospels of Esdras, Master Ahzek,' said Temelucha.

'The Syriac translation, many years ago,' replied Ahriman, understanding Temelucha was merely stating a fact, not asking a question. 'That copy has, sadly, been lost.'

‘When the wolves brought the fire?’

Ahriman nodded.

Prospero’s fall was a raw wound to his heart, but the pain came not from its doom, rather the horror of what had been lost in the ashes. An incalculable repository of hard-won knowledge and earned experience burned like the priceless texts of Persepolis; millennia of accumulated wisdom torn from existence in a wilful act of intellectual vandalism.

‘Prospero’s death was a loss to all mankind, not just the Thousand Sons,’ said Ahriman, and the pain of such woeful understatement almost broke his heart anew.

‘The Iron Oculus tells us that knowledge is never lost,’ said Temelucha without breaking stride. ‘It can fade like forgotten tales that sink into the mire of memory, remembered only by lonely spinners of verse, until it is needed and rises once more into dreams.’

‘Poetic, but you did not answer my question.’

‘You did not ask a question,’ pointed out Temelucha.

‘Very well,’ said Ahriman. ‘Is the Iron Oculus your prisoner?’

Temelucha smiled and said, ‘The writings of Esdras claim the Tartaruchi were once angels, and that their vengeful god set them before the gates of an infernal prison to guard against the return of a great devil.’

She gave Ahriman the look of a scholar jaded by too many garlanded histories to be impressed by such ancient hyperbole.

‘Once again, you evade answering.’

Irritation, quickly masked, shadowed Temelucha’s face. Clearly she was unused to her words being so carefully scrutinised, but had likely never met warrior-scholars of the Thousand Sons.

‘The Iron Oculus is shackled to the Torquetum, yes, but through no design of ours.’

‘So someone imprisoned it?’

‘Perhaps, but the Iron Oculus never speaks of itself.’

‘And you do not ask?’

‘What would be the benefit?’

‘Knowledge,’ said Ahriman. ‘The rendering of things unknown into fact. To trust the words of so powerful a captive without knowing why it was imprisoned seems somewhat incautious.’

‘We have faith in our purpose,’ replied Temelucha.

‘Faith?’ said Ahriman, unable to keep the venom that had been building within him since Prospero’s death from his voice. ‘All faith teaches is the virtue of not questioning, of blindly accepting dogma and holding things as sacred merely because they were deemed so in an earlier age by less enlightened souls.’

‘Then why are you here if not in faith that your questions will be answered?’

‘It is not faith that brings me here.’

‘Then what does?’

‘The will of the Crimson King,’ said Ahriman as they reached the top of the stairs and the majesty of the Silver Pavilion.

A plaza of frost-rimed cobbles spread before the temple, and snow fell in flurries of glittering dust. Flakes landed on Ahriman’s armour, glistening for a fleeting moment before melting like teardrops.

More of the Tartaruchi awaited them, eight adepts clad in loose-fitting robes of deepest blue and each bearing a unique symbol stitched over their heart. Their arms were bare and heavily tattooed, a mix of fractal spirals, number sequences and recursive labyrinths.

Like Temelucha, their eyes were warp-touched – one blinded, the other all-seeing. The symbolism was not lost on Ahriman. He wondered if the Tartaruchi were aware of the Prosperine significance of their mutation. A second thought came on the heel of the first.

Had Magnus the Red been here before?

Arrayed to left and right, like regiments on a parade ground, hundreds of yokai stood in ordered ranks, motionless but for the aetheric flames within them. Temelucha marched between the mechanised host bodies as the other members of her order joined her.

No introductions were offered, nor did Ahriman seek any.

The lacquered black gate swung open at Temelucha’s approach, and a pillared hall of porphyry and jade was revealed. Cold light and reflections danced within.

Ahriman followed the Mistress of the Tartaruchi inside, seeing that the entire space of the Silver Pavilion was given over to a multitude of crystal-fronted cabinets, arrayed like trophies in a museum of conquest. The Thousand Sons spread out, examining the displays with scholarly interest. Some cabinets contained elaborately wrought weapons, others artefacts of non-human origin, but most contained freakish skeletal remains.

Ahriman threaded a path between the exhibits, marvelling at the incredible diversity, intuitively knowing this was but a fraction of what the structure contained.

His steps carried him deeper inside, his gaze flitting between the ever more varied items on display: a gleaming endoskeleton surmounted by a silver death’s head helm with lambent green eyes and a geometric rune at its forehead; a series of arthropodal creatures with biomechanical stilt-legs; captured nebulae of glittering vapour-light held in jewelled vacuum flasks. The deeper he penetrated, the more obvious it became that the internal dimensions of the temple were subtly *wrong*.

Like Ceryiadha's gardens of rock and bleached gravel, laid out according to the *Sakuteiki*'s exacting specifications, aspects of the museum's contents were revealed or obscured relative to the viewer's perspective. What was visible from one vantage point was hidden from another, and entirely new exhibits were revealed.

Perhaps the entirety of the Silver Pavilion *was* on display; he just had to be positioned correctly within its multi-dimensional space to see it.

Ahriman paused beside a cabinet in which an exquisite suit of bone-white armour was encased. The fluid grace of its artifice spoke of eldar craft, and Ahriman sensed ageless, silent fury chained within. The helm was crafted as a howling spectre, with a blood-red plume coiled on a shoulder guard like a serpent poised to strike.

A long shiverspear was slung at the figure's shoulder and one bloodied gauntlet clenched a tri-bladed throwing weapon. Ahriman needed no seersight to know immobility was anathema to the thing bound to this armour.

'What is this place?' he asked.

'A reminder that not all who seek knowledge ought to find it,' said Temelucha.

Ahriman tapped his heqa staff against the crystal, and he felt the enraged spirit within hunger for his death.

'This is eldar,' he said.

'It is,' agreed Temelucha. 'A soul-eating revenant from the earliest age of their doom. Its witch-kin masters led it here to destroy the Iron Oculus. They failed.'

'And you killed them?'

'What lives within that armour can never truly die.'

Ahriman had studied the eldar myth cycles enough to know their warrior-gods were fated to return when needed most.

He leaned in to the crystal prison and said, 'Your race is dying and you will not save them.'

The spirit of the armour strained against its wards, but the warp craft of the Tartaruchi rendered its fury impotent. With Temelucha at his side, Ahriman followed a spiralling path towards the centre of the Silver Pavilion, keeping one eye on his fellow Thousand Sons as they too drew inwards.

The shifting arrangement of exhibits changed with every step he took. Previously visible artefacts vanished from sight and others appeared in their place.

As Ahriman stepped into the pavilion's centre, he stopped beside the fleshless remains of a fossilised greenskin with a monstrously swollen, hydrocephalic skull.

'How do you come by these exhibits?' he asked.

Temelucha clasped her hands before her.

‘The Silver Pavilion contains more secrets than even we know,’ she said. ‘My predecessor believed that what it chooses to reveal are swept from places within the Great Ocean where past and future collide. She told me that no two souls will see the same thing.’

Her words rang false, but before he could ask more, his steps brought him to the heart of the Silver Pavilion.

Shimmering rainbows of light cascaded from an octagonal shaft rising into the tower he had seen from outside. A pair of screw-stairs – one translucent crystal, the other obsidian – offered ascent, entwined in a double helix.

‘The Iron Oculus awaits at the summit,’ said Temelucha. ‘But only you and I may climb the twin stairs.’

‘We go alone?’

‘Like all who come here.’

Ahriman looked back at his Legion brothers, the yokai and the robed adepts of the Tartaruchi. His warriors knew what to do, and little would be served by disputing the issue of his lone ascent to the bound oracle.

He nodded to Menkaura and Sobek. His Practicus returned the nod, his body thrumming with barely suppressed tension.

Ahriman approached the corkscrewing stairs.

Each step was engraved with golden lettering, but where the words on the platform below were virtually illegible, these were phosphor-bright and easily read. *Another Prosperine echo.* This time of the paved approach to the Palace of Wisdom in the heart of lost Tizca. The marble slabs leading to the palace had been engraved with aphorisms from the Great Library’s most lauded contributors.

The first crystal step read: *The higher we are placed, the more humbly we should walk.*

Ahriman grinned mirthlessly as he read the obsidian step: *From the errors of others, a wise man corrects his own.*

‘Choose your path, Ahzek Ahriman,’ said Temelucha. ‘And choose wisely.’

Ahriman looked up into the falling borealis of light.

And chose obsidian.

Each step brought fresh words of wisdom. After the fourth step Ahriman stopped reading them. They were nothing he did not already know. The museum faded from sight as he climbed, but he had expected as much, suspecting this would be a metaphorical ascent as much as a literal one.

Infinite space unfolded in angles unknown to geometry and curvatures beyond the wit of calculus to solve. A trillion galaxies orbited him, smears of diamond dust on velvet amid rivers of light spun from earlier epochs of existence.

This was the workings of the universe laid bare, the secret face of all creation that some called gods, but which the Thousand Sons called aether. It was vast and

empty, yet behind the veil of stars, Ahriman felt the reptilian gaze of a vast and malign consciousness. A pagan soul might claim to feel the eye of the gods upon him, but not Ahzek Ahriman. Not any more.

His only anchor to solidity was the steps, plunging below him to unimaginable depths and rising to dizzying heights. None of it was real, at least in the mundane sense, but anything a mind could perceive would, in effect, be real, no matter how much the physical world might disagree.

Temelucha climbed the crystal stairs, and they wove around one another like dancers at the first notes of music.

Or gladiators in the opening moments of a deathmatch.

The second image was potent, the rising influence of the Pyrae not entirely robbing him of seersight. Ahriman veiled the thought, risking a glance towards Temelucha. Had she caught his flash of insight? It did not appear so.

Ahriman kept climbing, watching the dance of stars from their gravity-wrought births to their explosive endings. He saw firefly sparks of what must be space-faring civilisations spread and contract in the blink of an eye, dead and forgotten even as he noticed them. Galaxy-wide wars blazed between ancient gods and their immortal enemies, leaving bleeding scars on the fabric of space-time. A thousand empires rose and fell before the collapse of the molecular cloud that gave rise to the solar system.

'All is dust,' said Temelucha, barely more than a whisper.

'Is that what this is?' asked Ahriman, raising his hand to the natural beauty of the stars. 'A lesson in the entropic nature of existence, that all things decay to their ending?'

'Nothing so trite,' replied Temelucha, a hint of genuine remorse in her tone.

'Then what?'

'Call it a future echo of a warning that will go unheeded.'

Ahriman tapped his shoulder guard where a raven's head was carved within the serpentine halo of his Legion iconography.

'First Principles of the Corvidae,' he said. 'The past is carved in stone, the future an endlessly branching river.'

'No,' said Temelucha. 'It is not.'

Ahriman paused in his ascent and locked eyes with the mistress of the Tartaruchi.

'This coming from one who stands sentinel over an oracle?'

Temelucha reached across and placed her palm over the Corvidae raven's head. The light of the universe faded and the sense of being observed by inhuman intelligences was now entirely absent.

The awful silence of non-existence enveloped them both.

‘I have only moments, Ahzek Ahriman,’ said Temelucha, with what he could only interpret as fear of discovery. ‘You should not have come here. Leave now and never return.’

‘I cannot do that,’ he said, puzzled by her urgency. ‘The Crimson King has spoken and I must obey.’

‘It will not always be so,’ said Temelucha. ‘One day you will face him as an enemy.’

‘You have seen such a future?’

‘It is one of many the Iron Oculus has shown us.’

‘Then it is irrelevant,’ said Ahriman, losing patience with Temelucha. ‘Such “future echoes” are meaningless without context. End this charade. Bring me to your oracle and we will see if it even deserves such a title.’

‘As you wish,’ said Temelucha, and the starlight bloomed like trillions of unblinking eyes.

‘All is dust,’ repeated Temelucha. ‘Remember that when all about you is ash and despair.’

TWO

The oracle
Yokai
The curse

Lucius paced the pillared chamber, caring little for the wonders on display. Here and there a weapon caught his eye, but even the best were too alien or too inelegant for his tastes. His flesh was restless, his eyes ceaselessly roaming the pavilion's interior.

Usually he had perfect awareness of his environment, but the elastic dimensions of the pavilion's interior made it difficult to form an exact map of his surroundings. He followed an apparently random path through the museum's exhibits, pausing now and then to examine an item. Menkaura, Tolbek and Hathor Maat were doing the same, but their interest was genuine. Sobek hadn't moved since Ahriman left, yet Lucius sensed vibrations running through him, as though he were a plucked string tuned too tightly.

Lucius grinned, the web of self-inflicted scars turning it into a rictus leer as he saw Sanakht approach – the warrior whose death he'd sought on the Planet of the Sorcerers.

'You have no appreciation for these artefacts,' said Sanakht, 'so what are you doing?'

The warrior of the Thousand Sons was a sublime bladesman, a killer like him, and Lucius slipped his fingers towards his sword. Sanakht saw the movement and cocked his head.

He touched crosswise fingertips to the pommels of his own weapons and said, 'You and I will cross blades again, son of Fulgrim, but it will not be here.'

'Lucky for you,' said Lucius. 'If it wasn't for Ahriman I'd have taken your head.'

Sanakht didn't rise to the bait.

'There is no threat here. I would have seen it.'

'There's nothing obvious, agreed,' said Lucius, rolling his shoulders in readiness. 'Which only makes me *more* suspicious.'

Sanakht gestured to the yokai and the silent Tartaruchi at the foot of the twin screw-stairs, making it look like he was pointing out particularly impressive examples of weaponry.

'You think the Tartaruchi are dangerous?'

‘Not to me,’ nodded Lucius, going along with the charade, ‘but the hundreds of robots outside might be.’

‘They are not robots.’

‘So I heard, but there’s nothing put together by men I can’t take apart.’ He snorted in derision. ‘They’re not even armed.’

The bloom of supernovae faded and Ahriman found himself within a subterranean cavern. The recreation of an oracular temple was complete down to sulphurous fumes drifting from fissures in the obsidian floor.

Like the dwelling place of the Sleeper of N’kai, it was red-litten by a thick column of volcanic fumes bleeding from a rune-encircled shaft at its centre.

At the edge of the shaft and silhouetted against its infernal glow were around thirty kneeling figures. The billowing fumes obscured their true number, and save for beaked masks that resembled those of the plague-doctors of Old Earth, they were naked. Sweat dripped from their emaciated bodies as the heat slowly roasted them alive.

‘Who are they?’ asked Ahriman.

‘The Dread Scribes,’ said Temelucha, and he saw each figure had an open book to its left and right, into which they wrote feverishly with a charcoal stylus in both hands. ‘Psy-vessels through which the Iron Oculus delivers its visions.’

‘And where is your mighty oracle?’ asked Ahriman.

I AM HERE.

The psy-contact was so sudden, so violent, it drove him to one knee. Instantly he threw up a kine shield and rose into the eighth enumeration, gathering his powers to fight. The words came amid a tide of shrieking voices, driven insane by the tyranny of endless isolation.

Ahriman lifted his head as the smoke rising from the shaft cleared and saw the Iron Oculus, a hulking sarcophagus suspended over the shaft on a number of blackened chains.

A brute effigy of a thing, it had been beaten into shape from patchwork scraps of sheet metal. Seams like stitches and riveted iron straps held it together – less a sarcophagus, more an instrument of torture from the darkest ages of persecution.

Ahriman sensed a loathsome conjoining within the iron cage, as though twin souls were alloyed together in one monstrous whole. Lunatic screams echoed in his skull, a torrent of voices desperate to be heard. The frantic scratching of the Dread Scribes rose to new heights. Frenzied hands transcribed the oracle’s visions like men possessed.

From deep despair he rises, a lost son and fallen father!

The warrior of two faces to lead the knights of shadow!

Hush! The Exile stands before us!

Not yet in banishment, but many roads from here divide.

Which path will he take?

We know! We know! Tell him, tell him!

The voices were maddening, speaking in a garbled rush, interleaved and yammering. Their words were nonsense, the ravings of bedlamites, and Ahriman paid them little heed.

AHRIMAN, LONG HAVE I AWAITED YOUR ARRIVAL.

The whirlwind of voices faded to little more than a rustling as the dominant soul wrestled the others to submission, like leaves scattered by autumn winds.

'Who are you?' he asked.

I AM THE IRON OCULUS.

'A name bestowed upon you by others,' said Ahriman. 'Tell me your true name.'

YOU BELIEVE YOU CAN LEARN IN AN INSTANT WHAT IT TOOK YOUR SIRE MILLENNIA TO PRISE FROM MY LIPS?

'The Crimson King knows your name?'

NOT THE BY-BLOW FROM WHOM THE CRUDE MATTER OF YOUR FLESH WAS SPLICED… YOUR TRUE SIRE.

The creature sought to goad him with the insult, to anger him into rashness. Ahriman had treated with the blandishments, threats and snares of the neverborn many times and was beyond such blatant traps.

'You mean the Emperor?'

THE IPSISSIMUS, YES. THE OATHBREAKER.

Another obvious barb, but even after Prospero, Nikaea and the revelation of the Emperor's concealment of the Great Ocean's true nature, it still rankled to hear a warp creature speak ill of the Imperium's master.

***FOR NOW YOU MAY CALL ME…* AFORGOMON.**

Ahriman flinched at the tearing syllables. Two of the Dread Scribes collapsed, blood pouring from their beaked masks.

'That is not your true name.'

BUT IT FITS MY DESIGN TO WEAR IT FOR NOW.

'I *will* learn your true name, daemon,' promised Ahriman.

AH, I DO SO ENJOY HEARING THE OLD TITLES, said the Iron Oculus, and Ahriman felt its amusement like rusted hooks down his spine. ***IT PLEASES ME TO KNOW YOU CAN NO LONGER DENY THE TRUTH OF OUR NATURE.***

'I know full well what you are,' said Ahriman.

Again he felt the bound creature's mirth.

I DOUBT THAT VERY MUCH. YOU ARE A CUNNING ONE, AHZEK, BUT EVEN YOUR KNOWLEDGE HAS ITS LIMITS.

'I know more than you think.'

COME, THERE IS NO SHAME IN ADMITTING TO IGNORANCE. IS NOT THE FIRST AXIOM OF WISDOM ADMITTING YOU KNOW NOTHING?

'There is a wealth of difference between knowing nothing and not knowing enough,' said Ahriman, drawing the aether into his flesh and feeling the savage exultation of its potential. 'But I did not come here to debate the teachings of a dead man.'

Booming laughter filled the cavern. Smoke writhed from the cracks in the ground like serpents of temptation. The Dread Scribes ceased their writings in unison, turning their warp-lensed bird-masks upon Ahriman.

WE *KNOW WHY YOU CAME,* said the oracle. ***DOES* SHE?**

A surge of powerful aetheric discharge sparked behind Ahriman. His armour locked tight and a lethal blade of psychic fire appeared at his bare throat.

'She does now,' said Temelucha.

Menkaura stared at the ancient grimoire encased in the crystal cabinet with mounting excitement. Its leather binding had decayed to scraps, and the ancient pages were tissue-thin. The illuminated symbol on its frontispiece had faded to a ghost of its former brilliance, but the Enochian names of the angels within its overlaid geometric forms were unmistakable.

'*Sigillum Dei Aemaeth,*' said Menkaura, suspecting he beheld the last surviving copy of *Tractatus Astrologico Magicus*. 'The pure verities of the Queen's Astrologer.'

He pressed a palm against the glass, feeling a faint tremor from the energy field keeping the grimoire from crumbling to dust. To examine such a tome without destroying it would require the greatest adepts of the Pavoni and Raptora weaving their most artful raptures.

'Ah, Phosis T'kar, would that I had your skills,' he mused, remembering the captain of the Second Fellowship as he had been, not the flesh-changed monster he had become.

Menkaura was Corvidae, and though schooled in the kine-artes of the Raptora, as were all who survived the Dominus Liminus, he had not the mastery required for so delicate a task.

After the doom of Prospero, few remained who did.

Instead, he rose into the fourth enumeration, freeing his subtle body from the shackles of its fleshy prison. Such a potent record of the magician's deeds could yet yield secrets without physical examination. He eased his consciousness through the crystal, allowing it to blow the echoes of the grimoire to life like the dimmed embers of a fire. The imprinted essence of the dead magician rose from the grimoire like lake fog.

Menkaura felt the previous owner's presence as a memory of ghosts, the sense of someone seen out of the corner of his eye. A practitioner of the arte, certainly, perhaps even the grimoire's author. A seeker after knowledge, a warrior mystic like every brother of the Thousand Sons. Someone out of time, a walker between worlds, a man of triumph. Arrogant and so sure he could never fail. Menkaura shook his head at the man's foolishness.

The Thousand Sons knew better than any that even the greatest could fall, and fall *hard.*

He gasped as he felt the stabbing fire of sympathetic pain, a repercussion from the past. *Menkaura looked down and for a fleeting moment he saw the fiery kine-blade that had killed the magician jutting from the phantom ruin of his chest.*

The long-dead magician's disbelief warred with his pain, a child-like sense of outrage that he had been denied something.

Menkaura staggered as he felt the man die, his mind recoiling from the grimoire and careening around the exhibits. Horror engulfed him as yet more visions of death swept through him. *Agony as the wielder of a six-barrelled pistol had his limbs hacked off. Searing heat as armour designed for a creature with multiple arms became white-hot and burned its wearer to death.*

A sword, a mirror, an eagle-faced helm, a filigreed jewellery box. Death draped every one of them. Innumerable treasures that were not treasures at all, but trophies taken from the murdered corpses of the Torquetum's victims.

'Everything is a tombstone,' he said. 'A monument to murder.'

Menkaura's subtle body snapped back into his flesh, and the usual fleeting claustrophobia and revolting sense of meat and decay washed through him. He blinked away a haze of dizziness and drew in a breath of air.

He tasted metal and caustic oils, chrome and hot plastic.

A yokai stood next to him.

Blue-hot blades of psychic fire blazed to life at its fists.

The first clove Menkaura's armour and split his primary heart before ripping down to burst his lungs. The second swept around in a decapitating strike.

Another sword intercepted it, silver-steel and buzzing with photonic energies. A bolt pistol fired, deafeningly close, and the yokai's head exploded.

'I thought you people could see the future?' snapped Lucius.

'You mean to take the Iron Oculus from us,' said Temelucha.

'I do,' agreed Ahriman, feeling the heat of the aetheric blade at his throat.

'Why?'

'The Crimson King demands I do so.'

Temelucha circled around Ahriman, a crackling sword of indigo fire extending from her fingertips. His armour would offer no protection against such a blade.

He sensed Temelucha's desire to end his life warring with her deep confusion as to why she had not already done so.

'I told you to go,' she said. 'I gave you a chance to leave this place alive.'

'Did you give those whose possessions you parade below the same chance?' said Ahriman. 'My brothers may not guess the truth of it, but I know a mortis reliquary when I see one.'

'They were all like you,' said Temelucha, her bladed hand trembling with the urge to thrust into his neck. '*Knowing* their future was never enough – they wanted to *change* it. Like you, they sought to steal knowledge that was not theirs to take and bend its power to their own ends.'

Ahriman sensed falsehood and said, 'Then why warn me? It was not for my benefit, was it?'

'I gave you the chance to change your fate,' said Temelucha, her coloured eye churning with desperate psy-light. Ahriman lifted his gaze to the brute form of the hanging sarcophagus, feeling its power oozing outwards. Whatever wards bound the Iron Oculus were nowhere near as secure as Temelucha believed.

'It was not *my* fate you sought to change,' said Ahriman as the control of his armour crumbled. 'It was yours.'

Temelucha cried in release and thrust her blade for his heart. Ahriman's heqa staff swung down to intercept it. Aetheric energies blazed. He spun the staff and extended his hand. Temelucha's fiery blade was snuffed out, a candle against a hurricane.

She flew at him, borne aloft on silent winds, aetheric power coruscating along her limbs. The air around Ahriman shrieked as it ignited. He blinked and a skin of sub-zero air encased him. Roaring, superheated vapour exploded from Ahriman.

Temelucha flew into it, and her screams were piteous as the searing mist boiled the flesh from her bones. Even as she fell, her command of the enumerations was quelling the pain. Her robes hung scorched and bloody, her meat now skinless and weeping. Too agonised to reach for the higher powers, she cast lightning from her hands in jagged, arcing bolts.

Ahriman's staff broke them to glassy splinters, and he lashed her raw with the reflected power. Temelucha reeled in pain, her mind's defences in tatters. Easy prey for an adept of his skill and ruthlessness to tear apart from the inside.

He bombarded her with phantasms, filling her skull with the manifold horrors of Prospero's annihilation. All the nightmarish things he had seen, the unimaginable losses he had suffered – he concentrated them into one, merciless skewer and drove it right through the heart of her.

Temelucha screamed as physical agony and psychic terror coalesced in a blaze of unimaginable suffering. The only refuge was madness, and the shattered ruin of her mind fled to darkness rather than endure another moment of that day.

She collapsed, little more than hollowed-out meat. Her chest hiked in unnatural rhythms as the autonomic functions of her brain went into seizure. Her curious eyes were molten craters, burned out by the ravaging psychic fire.

Ahriman stood over the twitching body, feeling nothing for her pain. What had ended her, he had suffered in reality. But Legion minds and Legion flesh could endure grief and pain beyond any mortal tolerance.

'You were deceived,' said Ahriman, though Temelucha was utterly beyond comprehension. 'The Iron Oculus was never your prisoner to guard.'

'Nor is it yours… to take…'

Her features went slack and whatever wisdom she had left to impart went unsaid. Ahriman lifted his gaze to the iron sarcophagus. Its power had withdrawn, coiled within its metal cell like a predatory serpent whose monstrous appetite was now sated.

'I am right, am I not? You were never their prisoner.'

OF COURSE NOT.

'You kept her blade from my neck. You broke her hold on my armour.'

YES.

'Why?'

SHE MEANT TO KILL YOU, AND WE HAVE OUR BARGAIN YET TO STRIKE.

Ahriman stepped towards the hanging sarcophagus. Its chains creaked as it swung slowly towards him. The stitched seams split, bleeding droplets of raw aether into the shaft below.

'What bargain?'

'What in Fulgrim's name is a mandala?' yelled Lucius, spitting blood as he picked himself up from the glass-and-timber ruins of a display case. Disintegrating leather and paper fluttered around him.

Menkaura lay slumped next to Lucius, seemingly more distressed at the drifting scraps than the grievous wound in his chest. The yokai whose hammering psy-shock had felled Lucius was a molten mass of fused metal and plastic.

Tolbek's powers were ascendant in a brutally direct way.

'A mandala is a ritual symbol used to represent the universe,' said Sanakht, blocking a scythe blade composed entirely of vibrating air molecules. 'Its cosmic symbolism focuses the mind of a practitioner as a means of establishing a sacred formation in which to fight.'

'You mean a kill-circle?' said Lucius.

'A simplistic way of putting it, but yes.'

'You Sons and your fancy words,' said Lucius, spinning on his heel to decapitate a porcelain-masked yokai with a crack of his vile whip. The swordsman dropped to one knee and cut low. His silver blade sliced the slender

ceramic-and-steel calves of another yokai. It crashed to the metalled decking, and a blaze of tar-black aether fire shrieked from its contoured skull.

The automata surrounded the Thousand Sons, like greenskins around a last shield-wall. No sooner had Menkaura fallen than Sanakht and the rest of the Thousand Sons formed the mandala around the Corvidae adept. A moment later, the yokai host from beyond the black gate poured in to attack. At least two hundred, maybe more. They came at them with a lethal mix of psychic blades, integral cannons, kine powers and pyromantic energies.

Sanakht had faced too few to yet discern any correlation between the goetic sigils and each yokai's power. His hawk blade deflected the downward strike of a psychic edge as he sprang to his feet. The yokai's enflamed weapon reversed direction with blinding speed.

He leaned into it, letting the psy-blade carve the crimson and silver of his shoulder plate. Spinning inside the yokai's guard, he hammered his jackal blade through the centre of its blank skull. Black fire burned along the blade as he wrenched it clear and blocked yet another attack.

The fight was breathtakingly swift, blows exchanged at a pace no mortal bladesman could match. The yokai were machine-fast and warp-cunning, but the Thousand Sons fought with transhuman reflexes alloyed to unmatched psychic discipline.

Arrayed in the sacred geometry of the mandala, they fought shoulder to shoulder as brothers, their minds linked to seamlessly blend their abilities in a cohesive whole.

Tolbek threw up blazing shields against the shredding gunfire of the yokai's fist cannons. Ceramic shells turned to hot vapour in mid-flight, still travelling at supersonic speeds but harmless to Legion battleplate.

In return, the Pyrae adept crafted darts of phosphorescent brilliance that pierced the armour of the automata and cored them to the heart of their bindings. The warp scraps died in blazing plumes of incandescent fire.

Hathor Maat engaged the Tartaruchi, freezing their flesh for Sobek to smash apart with kine blows more powerful than a thunder hammer in the hands of a Sekhmet champion. Ahriman's Practicus grunted as he fought, veins standing out like pulsing feed-lines on his neck. Though grievously wounded, Menkaura used his Corvidae seersight to gift each warrior with prescient reaction times.

They fought at the edge of their abilities, but only Lucius appeared to be relishing the ferocious skill of their enemies.

'Fast for robots,' said the swordsman, perversely proud of just how little he understood this foe. He cracked his lash and laughed as its barbed tip split open a seamless skull. Black fire geysered from within, a piercing shriek of pained release to those whose senses were open to the Great Ocean.

‘I told you, they are not robots,’ replied Sanakht, rolling his wrists and sidestepping a thrust to his groin. ‘Didn’t you hear what Ahriman said?’

He stamped to the side and buckled an attacking yokai’s knee inwards. It staggered and Sanakht scissored both blades through its neck.

He stepped back from the spurting black fire.

‘I weep to destroy such exquisitely fashioned artefacts.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ yelled Lucius, using the shattered chest of a falling yokai to vault into the air and sever three enamelled heads before his feet hit the ground.

Lucius landed lightly, spinning with both arms extended and a reptilian leer splitting the reticulated skin of his hairless skull. He snapped his wrist and the lash coiled around its ebon handle in a manner altogether too organic for Sanakht’s liking.

‘Are such wasteful theatrics truly necessary?’ he asked.

‘They’re dead, aren’t they?’ countered Lucius.

‘Save your energy for the next hundred then.’

‘Enough talking,’ commanded Hathor Maat, sweeping his arms out to blast a wedge of frozen air through the yokai. ‘Keep to the sixth enumeration. Menkaura! If you cannot fight, seek out the minds of the Tartaruchi. Kill them and it may break the yokai’s link to the Great Ocean.’

Sanakht risked a glance over his shoulder. Menkaura sat on his haunches at the centre of a bloody lake, propped against the remains of the broken display case. His eyes were closed, but he nodded and Sanakht felt the seer’s mind cast itself into the Great Ocean for the means to defeat their foes.

‘Look at him!’ snapped Sobek, striding to the forefront of the mandala with his staff and gauntlet held before him like an ancient prophet. ‘Our brother is all but dead.’

‘Wait!’ cried Tolbek. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Ending this!’ roared Sobek, eyes wide and skin both ruddy and taut.

‘No! The mandala will be broken. Its geometry cannot hold with only four adepts!’

Sobek ignored him and spat words of power Sanakht had never dared read in close proximity, each one a rusted nail hammered through his skull. As every deceitful syllable poisoned the air, living nightmares coalesced in tattered ghost-slicks around Ahriman’s Practicus.

Crack-horned *things.* Broken-toothed *things.*

Negative imprints of terrors best left to the shadows.

Sobek drew them into his body with a roar, and every one of the Thousand Sons staggered at the repercussive sickness of their dread touch.

‘What in Ruin’s name is he doing?’ said Lucius.

‘Reform the mandala,’ said Hathor Maat, ignoring the swordsman’s question.

‘The Voydes of Drekhye,’ said Sanakht, feeling his eyes weep tears of blood in response.

No sooner had he foolishly named the evocation than a host of darkly radiant comets erupted from Sobek’s staff, howling like war-dogs with the taste of blood on their tongues. They ignored the horde of smooth-skinned automata, slashing between them towards the living, breathing Tartaruchi.

The Chronicles of Ursh and other poetic grimoires spoke of forbidden sciomancy summoning these voydes: malignant warp wraiths that unravelled their victim’s souls and devoured them piece by piece.

Until now Sanakht had believed them lurid inventions.

The dark comets struck the Tartaruchi and he knew differently.

The guardians of the Iron Oculus were literally turned inside out. Bones snapped like tinder. Metre upon metre of veins and arteries unspooled in wet ropes. Organs detonated like grenades, and teeth and bone shards flew like bullets as apocalyptic quantities of blood aerosolised in a vile mist.

The screams of the Tartaruchi echoed long after their flesh was ruined. It was an animal sound, the sound of prey being ripped to pieces by spiteful predators that kill for pleasure.

The broken bodies fell apart like sodden rags, and the fury of the automata was extinguished in the same instant.

Without the Tartaruchi, the controlling animus of the yokai was broken. They froze like a phalanx of Cybernetica battle robots with malfunctioning slave collars. The entities within shrieked in anger as they were cast back into the Great Ocean.

Sobek’s ploy had succeeded, but the voydes allowed him no breath to speak the words of ending, no motion to cast a rune of severance. The wraith creatures twisted towards the Thousand Sons, hungry for fresh souls to rend.

‘Sobek!’ shouted Hathor Maat. ‘Stop this. Now!’

But Sobek remained locked in place, undone by the power he had unleashed and the pact he had unthinkingly made. His staff dropped from palsied fingers and his mouth stretched wide with a crack of tearing cartilage and snapping sinew.

‘The Sign of Amaterasu!’ cried Menkaura from the centre of the mandala. His sudden shout drew a froth of bright blood from his mouth and chest. ‘Invoke its sigil now! All of you.’

Sanakht fought to visualise the complex sigils and somatic forms of Amaterasu’s warding configuration, but the howling, gibbering wraiths filled his mind with broken glass.

He felt Menkaura’s presence within his psyche, guiding him as he had guided so many of the Legion over the decades. Menkaura had learned his craft from

Magister Templi Amaterasu, who had in turn received his wisdom from Magus Phanek himself – whose master had been Magnus the Red.

And still it wasn't enough.

The voydes struck the mandala and broke it open with howling glee. The impact swatted Sanakht from his feet and foetid winds reeking of corrupted blood clogged his helm's filters.

The mandala was broken and each warrior fought alone.

The voydes had slain the Tartaruchi in an instant, but these were Legion warriors they faced.

Sobek remained isolated, locked within his armour like a statue. The voydes ignored him, sensing his flesh offered no sport. Hathor Maat stood over Menkaura, a swirling corona of biomantic power keeping the wraiths at bay for now. A pillar of blinding fire obscured Tolbek as he gave free rein to his powers. With the flesh change a very real danger, the Crimson King had warned them against such displays.

But what other choice was there?

All thoughts of the Sign of Amaterasu were forgotten as the spectral forms of the muttering wraiths surrounded Sanakht like frenzied sharks.

They came at him in a rush of night-black claws and freezing shadows, faster than anything he had fought before. Each touch was a blade of ice in his heart, slowing him, making him vulnerable. He found himself back to back with Lucius, their affinity as swordsmen naturally pulling them together.

They spun in a kill-circle of their own, forced into a bargain of mutual trust neither really believed.

Not that they had a choice.

'You have your wish,' said Sanakht.

'What wish?'

'Finding a foe who can kill you.'

Lucius laughed as he struck out at the voydes.

'These things?' he said. 'No, this isn't my death.'

Sanakht read the utter certainty flaring in the swordsman's aura and wondered how he could be so sure.

Later, *much later,* Sanakht would wonder if Lucius had known of the eternal damnation lying in wait for him.

And even if he had, would he have changed it?

None of them would die this day.

Sanakht and Lucius fought with skill that had not been seen since the rival champions had duelled at the walls of lost Truva, and, had fate decreed their Legions remain true, such courage would have become legend in the Imperium.

With Hathor Maat on his knees and Menkaura sliding into death's embrace, Tolbek alone fought the voydes on an equal footing. Pillars of gleeful flame scattered their darkness as spears of molten light burned them back.

And still it wasn't enough.

Hathor Maat fell to the shadows as if beneath a murder of ravens. Tolbek's fire was brutally smothered by the aching cold of the voydes. A flurry of clawed shadows penetrated Sanakht's defences, plunging into his ribs and freezing his heart. He fell, plunging into what felt like a depthless pool of glacial water.

None of them would die this day.

Ahriman made sure of that.

The blood was barely dry on Ahriman's lips, made bitter by his unlooked-for bargain, yet rich with promise. At the instant of the sworn pledge, the oracular cavern vanished as though it had never existed.

In a very real sense, it had not.

Ahriman experienced a sense of falling, a rush of motion.

He had a momentary glimpse of shattered display cabinets and a host of crowing darkness surrounding his fellow legionaries.

They fought alone. Losing. Dying.

The floor rushed up to meet him, though Ahriman understood he was not falling in any literal sense of the word. He felt the Iron Oculus, its looming presence like a leaden weight dragging a drowning man to his doom.

They arrived with force enough to crater the floor. Ahriman knelt, slamming his ebon staff down with a psychic shock wave that scattered the darkness like wind-blown chaff.

The floor ruptured, heaving into the air with wracking seismic violence. Giant slabs split like frosted glass and streamers of star-bright aetheric energy geysered in iridescent clouds.

The Iron Oculus squatted at the centre of the crater like the blasphemous idol of a long-dead and unlamented empire. Sealed within that ghastly prison, the thing that called itself Aforgomon waited upon his word.

Ahriman nodded, sealing their compact.

'Do it,' he said.

A howling gale filled the chamber like booming laughter. It drew the seething clouds of aether to the canted form of the Iron Oculus, as though it took a vast and unending breath. Even as the voydes gathered their strength for another assault, the dread oracle of the Torquetum released that breath.

It exploded outwards in a crackling ring of too-bright light, a halo of divine retribution. This was a light no shadow could evade and it burned the voydes to shrieking ash in the blink of an eye.

Miniature dust devils of tarry ash fought to hold on to this reality, but their time here was over. The swordsman Lucius stood in the midst of the last, faded remnants of the creatures. They dissipated as the grinning killer watched with repugnant self-satisfaction, as though *he* had defeated the creatures single-handedly.

Ahriman exhaled the tension from his lungs and rose to his feet. He closed his eyes and pushed his perceptions outwards, questing for the lives of his warriors.

Every one of them was here, alive.

Tolbek, Hathor Maat, Menkaura, Sanakht. Sobek…

Ahriman's eyes snapped open. 'Flesh change!' he shouted.

He ran to Sobek. The rush of seersight misted Ahriman's eyes with throbbing pain. His Practicus stood unmoving, resplendent in crimson and silver, as magnificent as the sculptures that once graced the pyramids of Tizca.

Stuttering across that image was a grating aether-spectre, a future echo of Sobek's fate. It thrashed in the midst of a hideous transformation. Ghostly battleplate burst open like shattered eggshell and cancerous flesh erupted in a riot of uncontrolled mutation and malignant growths.

'Hathor Maat!' he shouted. 'To me!'

Ahriman's senses reached out, feeling the dreadful ambition of Sobek's flesh. The Emperor's miracle unravelling, the sword hanging over every warrior of the Thousand Sons.

'Help. Me,' said Sobek through gritted teeth, his locked expression one of abject horror. Only once before had Ahriman seen such naked fear in the face of a Legion brother. Knowing your own body was rebelling, seeking to throw off its perfect form and assume some new and horrific aspect, was surely a terror unlike any other.

'What happened?' he demanded as Hathor Maat pushed past him to place a palm on the back of Sobek's shaven skull. 'What did this to him?'

'The damn fool did it to himself,' said Hathor Maat. A nimbus of light gathered behind the Pavoni adept's eyes as he sought to quell the gathering horde of mutations.

'He *saved* us,' said Sanakht, appearing behind Ahriman.

'Explain.'

'The Voydes of Drekhye,' said Sanakht. 'Sobek called them from the abyss to slay the Tartaruchi.'

'And then they turned on us,' grunted Hathor Maat, his breath like glacial mist.

Ahriman shook his head. 'The Sign of Amaterasu?'

'We had no notion what he was conjuring until it was too late,' said Sanakht.

'He broke the mandala on his own,' said Hathor Maat.

A frosted caul bloomed in Sobek's eyes, his skin losing its mottled hue as Hathor Maat's powers spread through him, shock-freezing his flesh.

'Will that stop it?' asked Sanakht.

Hathor Maat let his ice-rimed hand fall from Sobek's frozen solidity. His eyes were too blue, too webbed with frost.

'No,' he said. 'This is a delaying tactic at best. It will not stop the oncoming flesh change, but will slow it.'

'Perhaps enough to return our brother to the Planet of the Sorcerers,' said Ahriman.

'Perhaps not,' said Hathor Maat, turning on Ahriman. 'For all your cunning, and after all your researches and theories, you are no nearer to ending the curse.'

The curse.

The secret never spoken aloud for fear of awakening the traitor within their own flesh. Like so many other terrible flaws hidden deep within the Legions, flaws none dared admit.

The phantoms haunting the skeletal pyramids rusting beneath the nine suns gibbered of such things, but only the maddened beast packs listened to their whispers.

'I can save you,' Ahriman promised Sobek. 'I *will* save you.'

Lucius circled behind Sobek, captivated by what Hathor Maat had done. His voyeuristic fascination revolted Ahriman.

'How?'

Ahriman turned. Menkaura's question was simple, yet Ahriman had no easy answer for him. The seer's body was bitterly wounded, an arm hooked across Tolbek's shoulder guard all that was keeping him upright.

'You know how,' said Ahriman.

Menkaura shook his head. 'No, the Crimson King forbade it.'

'So I am to just let him die?' said Ahriman, turning to face each of his brothers in turn. 'What if this happens to you, Sanakht? Or you, Hathor Maat? Should I let you all die? Any of you? And you, Menkaura? Your aura is fading. Your life hangs by a thread. Imagine I were an Apothecary, but the Crimson King forbade me from using my skills to save you.'

'It is not the same,' said Menkaura. 'You risk–'

'It is *exactly* the same,' snapped Ahriman. 'I would hold the means to save your life, but misplaced faith and a stricture that makes no sense would condemn you to an agonising death. Have you forgotten Phosis T'Kar? Have you? You remember the monster he became? Or Hegazha? Or Khaphed? Hastar?'

'I remember them all,' said Menkaura through a mouthful of blood. 'I also remember Astennu. I remember how your arrogance saw him perish in fiery agony.'

‘Yes, he died,’ said Ahriman. ‘But at least I tried. If the change takes you, would you be willing to die rather than have me try to save you?’

‘When the change comes for me, you must kill me as Russ killed Hastar – swiftly and without mercy.’

Meaning was veiled in Menkaura’s words – it always was – but had his brother’s seersight glimpsed a measure of his fate? A destiny where death was preferable to life?

‘Enough,’ said Hathor Maat. ‘I cannot hold Sobek’s flesh forever. We have to get him to the *Khemet* and take him home.’

Ahriman rounded on Hathor Maat.

‘The World of the Nine Suns is *not* our home.’

THREE

Unnameable
Brothers
Aforgomon

The planet was stubborn.

Thus far, it had resisted every attempt to graft a name upon it. Some called it the World of the Nine Suns, but the lambent stars circling overhead defied that title by capriciously dividing or vanishing. Others gave it names from dead languages, but these were swiftly forgotten.

A few sought to match the protean character of the world to ancient gods from myth and legend as the stargazers of old had once done. No sooner had they settled on a name than whatever planetary aspect they sought to echo swiftly changed, rendering their choice meaningless.

In the end there was only one possible way to know it.

Lucius had mocked its brazen literalness, but even he had to concede its apposite nature.

The Planet of the Sorcerers.

A titanic pyramid of bronzed clockwork drifted in a tempest of iridescent clouds. A gilded cathedral afloat in an ocean of colours that had never existed and would never be seen again.

The pyramid's grinding, ratcheting faces coruscated with traceries of aether lightning, and spectral warp fiends gorged on the psy-vortices of its wake.

Thousands-strong shoals of razor-winged creatures flocked to the pyramid, drawn by the reflected light of distant stars. Like bejewelled manta rays, they swooped over its sides and basked in its radiant energies with songs of haunting beauty.

Amon watched them from a projecting balcony, finding mystical significance in the spiralling patterns they made. Sentient zephyrs blew into his alchemical workshop, chattering and yammering as they explored its secret spaces. The winds tasted caustic, of the prelude to a storm and its aftermath.

'Everything of this world is contradictory,' said Amon, peering into the clouds. 'Its soul is inchoate.'

The sky offered no reply, but the grey-skinned golems behind Amon wept as the spiteful winds passed through their flesh to fleetingly unlock walled-away memories.

‘It is birthed anew in every breath,’ he said, turning over hands stained arterial-red, the soul sighing into the warp like smoke. ‘Perhaps *that* is the problem.’

Another divination failed.

Another window into the future shattered.

Every astrological clock, every aether-infused flect, every diseased liver, every burned heart, every unpeeled eye was bereft of meaning. The Corvidae were blinded – their power at its lowest ebb while the witless Pyrae gloried in the primarch’s light.

Amon’s painstakingly calculated celestial charts were worse than useless, the motion of the heavens speaking in riddles he could not decipher.

At terrible cost, he had collected sand from the daemon-haunted wastelands of Tizca to craft the finest scrying lenses. No sooner had he aimed them at Terra than the glass shattered, leaving him all but blind in one eye. A lesser scholar might have counted that a favourable omen, but Amon sought nothing less than the truth.

His every effort had been for nothing. The stars were occluded by a radiance to the east, a newborn god in mortal form. Or so the patterns in the fire claimed, but any fool knew flames were not to be trusted.

Amon lifted his mind into the third enumeration, seeking clarity he knew he would never find. Not now. Not here.

Not alone.

He sought answers the Legion needed to survive. Answers his sire could find in a heartbeat, but chose not to. Ahriman railed against that refusal to act, but even after Prospero, Amon trusted Magnus to know better than any of them.

Even Ahzek Ahriman.

Especially Ahzek Ahriman.

Magnus spoke of the Chief Librarian’s success beyond the edges of reality. Amon took no solace in Ahriman’s imminent return, needing no augurs to see that the differing paths they trod could only lead to bloodshed.

A pack of glittering manta-creatures swooped over the balcony, their pallid underbellies alive with wet blisters that rolled over into myriad eyes or burst as gibbering mouths. Their song teased at Amon’s senses, as though great and terrible secrets could be learned if only he knew how to listen.

Far below the equerry’s airborne pyramid, the broken landscape of the planet spread to its infinite horizons. No two vistas were the same and, as far as he knew, none were ever repeated. Amon’s great instruments of farseeing had catalogued restless oceans of diamond breaking in dazzling rainbows against vast islands of fossilised gods, twisting labyrinths plunging vertiginously through the planet’s heart and waterfalls of screaming faces that cascaded into the sky.

With a thought, he directed his pyramid lower, breaking through the clouds and revealing the lunatic geography of the world to which Magnus had brought them.

Skies of striated aether storms, inverted lightning and a world in eternal flux. Where every breath was rich with potential, every exhalation an act of power. Black mountains, iron deserts, rivers of metal and gibbering forests where the shadows told tales of ancient gods to the stones.

Here and there were fluted towers of silver and gold, crystal and stone, steel and glass puncturing the landscape, cyclopean spires raised by psychic might and will. Never in the same place twice and never quite the same as they were remembered.

Some delved the planet's bedrock as deep as they pierced the heavens. Others drifted on waves of light and yet more were impossible constructions that could only exist where the dominion of natural laws meant less than nothing.

These were the sorcerous towers of his brothers, all that remained of the once proud XV Legion in the wake of the Wolf King's assault.

No, not quite all…

The remains of Tizca glittered beneath ashen clouds in a wasteland of nightmares given life and the flesh-changed monsters who escaped the cleansing flames of Pavoni zealots. The pyramids of the Five Fellowships were rusted skeletons of corroded steel and shattered glass. Forks of baleful lightning danced through the gutted structures, shimmering on the billions of mirror fragments scattered among the ruins.

Familiar anger burned hot in Amon's heart.

'You will pay for what you did to us,' he said as he saw the one constant of this world.

A windowless tower of obsidian, taller than any in the galaxy. Stark and brutal against the tortured sky, empyreal tides slicked its surface with invisible light.

The Tower of the Cyclops.

Lair of Magnus the Red.

'Library' was too small a word for the Gallery of Pergamum.

Illuminated walls stretched far and wide, beyond anything conventional geometry could allow. Gold-and-silver shelves brimmed with grimoires, crystalline wafers, wood-print blocks, scrimshawed bone and cord-tied parchments.

The light of the planet's myriad suns pooled in its polished galleries like mercury, glittering from heroic statues of goddesses bearing copper scrolls and iridescent quills.

Had there ever existed a mortal heaven, this would have been its library. And walking its gilded halls were two numinous giants that might have brought such a thing into being.

They conversed as old friends might upon a chance encounter, but nothing of this meeting owed a debt to chance. Veiled in corposant, neither was truly flesh and blood. Their bodies were light and mist, fire made flesh. Their spirits given form by sheer will and shared desire.

Magnus the Red had cast off his corporeal shell on Prospero, and was now, by any credible definition, a self-created god. Veiled in imagined robes of palest blue, he yet retained his ruddy complexion, scarlet hair and cyclopean countenance.

But in every other aspect, he was renewed.

Magnus the warrior was gone; only the scholar remained.

In contrast, Lorgar Aurelian was a king of battle, armoured in crimson and scriptural gold made vivid by the light of many suns. He bore a long-hafted mace with a flanged head that had tasted the blood of his brothers and hungered for more. His bearing was martial, but the delight in his eyes at the vast scale of knowledge surrounding him was entirely genuine.

'*Hard to believe you saved so much…*' he said.

'This?' said Magnus, with regret that would consume him if he let it. 'The Gallery of Pergamum houses around sixty million remembered volumes, and it represents a fraction of just one Tizcan library. The accumulated wisdom we lost to the Wolves was many orders of magnitude greater than this.'

'*But you have others? Other libraries, I mean.*'

'I hope we will.'

'*You* hope *you will?*'

'I have learned a great deal of this world, but I have yet to fathom all its secrets,' said Magnus.

Lorgar halted, shocked at his brother's words. '*I don't think I have ever heard you say that.*'

'Say what?'

'*That there is something you don't know.*'

Magnus smiled ruefully and continued walking. 'Times have changed, brother. *I* have changed.'

Lorgar followed him, and Magnus felt his brother's careful scrutiny. The primarch of the Word Bearers had changed too, though Magnus doubted he truly understood quite how much. The self-righteous fanatic that Magnus had spoken with on the *Fidelitas Lex* was still there, but he had been tempered by loss and made mighty by victory.

His brother paused to pluck a book from a golden shelf.

'The Amber Regent. *I don't know this one.*'

'Careful, brother,' said Magnus. 'It is a cursed tale within a tale. Legend tells it will drive a man to madness simply by reading its opening line.'

‘*Is that true?*’

‘Who can say? I have never tried to read it.’

‘*Then why save it?*’ replied Lorgar.

‘Because I could, and because I must,’ replied Magnus, his voice assuming the reflective tones of a teacher. ‘Knowledge is a continuum, brother, and it is my duty to ensure that continuum remains unbroken for those who come after me.’

‘*A grand vision, but why bother with a book that cannot be read?*’ said Lorgar, placing it back on the shelf.

Magnus sighed regretfully. ‘I fear the Covenant ruined the joy of knowledge for you. Books have always been fearful things to priesthoods, things to be policed and secured from the populace – dangerous with radical new ideas and innumerable possibilities. I see things differently. I see books as repositories of knowledge to be savoured in and of themselves. Possession of a book is its own reward, and a worthy tale confers its own merit upon the reader.’

‘*Always the tutor,*’ said Lorgar, though Magnus saw the truth of his instruction was lost on his brother.

He turned from Lorgar and moved onwards through the gallery, lambent fingertips trailing over the spines of his books and experiencing their contents as he went. The sublime poetry of Gallabros, the celestial mechanics of *Sidereus Nuncius,* the works of the great dramaturges of Albyon, histories of long-dead lands, lineages of kings and emperors. His features relaxed as knowledge filled him. He paused at the works of the great tragedian and his face fell as a portion of the Twisted Queen’s soliloquy echoed within him. Magnus whispered its words, knowing them, yet feeling them fly from his lips as though freshly written.

‘Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,

By prophecies, libels, and dreams,

To set my brother and the king in deadly hate,

The one against the other…’

‘*What’s that?*’ asked Lorgar.

‘A quote. From a play I saw many years ago.’

‘*You don’t sound entirely sure about that.*’

‘No,’ said Magnus, letting his hand fall to his side. ‘I *do* remember. The stage was set before the Pyramid of Photep. Daylight was fading. A single lamp illuminated the stage. Coraline Aseneca played the Twisted Queen, and her performance was extraordinary.’

The memory was a good one, a reminder of better times.

So why did it feel like something he had learned, instead of something he had experienced?

‘*A pity she was assigned to the Phoenician’s fleet,*’ Lorgar murmured. ‘*His warriors have become unkind to mortals.*’

‘And yours have not?’ countered Magnus, shaking off the sensation.

‘*You* have *changed,*’ said Lorgar with a grin, ignoring Magnus’ question. ‘*Your mien was always inconstant, as much a product of the viewer as the viewed, but now you seem somehow… incomplete.*’

Magnus nodded. How easy it was to forget that beneath Lorgar’s zealous fire and endless apocalyptic pronouncements, his brother had a keen eye for the hidden truth of things. But Magnus had no wish to explore his momentary lapse.

‘Prospero’s doom stripped me of the desire to continually reinvent myself,’ he said by way of explanation.

‘*Some might call that perverse.*’

‘How so?’

‘*In that you deny your true nature. That on a world of infinite possibilities, you choose to cling to a single aspect and turn from the truth of your very existence.*’

‘Preaching again, brother?’

‘*No. Simply reminding you of what you already know.*’

Lorgar paused to marshal the same, tired argument he had brought to the Obsidian Tower time and time again.

‘*The Pantheon can help you,*’ he said. ‘*The Primordial Annihilator is all-powerful and its victory is inevitable. You of all of us must see that? I have ventured farther than any in this realm. I have seen the truth of the universe and it almost cost me my life. I know you have seen it too, brother, so why cling to this world when the one beyond has so much more to offer? You and I? We are heralds of the neverborn kings, Magnus. We are* gods *in waiting.*’

Magnus kept walking. He had heard this and variations thereof, on numerous occasions, but denial only served to spur the zealot to greater heights of proselytising. He paused when he realised he had left Lorgar behind. He turned to see his brother standing in a shaft of silver light, his armour shimmering wetly in the light of false stars. He held *Illuminarum* out before him, the sceptre-mace crafted by Ferrus Manus coruscating with power.

‘*Horus is reborn!*’ said Lorgar, as though from a pulpit. ‘*He passed into the realm of the gods and they raised him up. He has ascended and you can too. I see the cracks in your soul and I know what seeps from them. Russ smote you a mighty blow, brother. He wounded you deeper than any realise, but I see it.*’

Magnus retraced his steps to stand before Lorgar, his single eye cauled with aetheric phosphorescence.

‘You see what they *let* you see,’ said Magnus, pinning Lorgar with his lucent gaze. ‘I felt Horus’ rebirth, yes. This world sang of his newfound powers and the heavens split with joy at his return from the immortal realm. But none of us will ever know what price he paid for that power, the horror of what he so lightly bargained away.’

Magnus turned his back on Lorgar and walked towards a newly formed crystal arch, through which yet more arcs of bright shelves were visible. His brother came after him, hooking the mace across his back as they passed beneath the archway.

He heard Lorgar's breath catch in his throat, his senses fighting to process the scale of the colossal space in which he found himself – a vault of such immensity it was impossible to believe it was an internal space. Its uttermost walls were lost in a misty haze of distance, and the gentle curve of its domed roof was a map bright with distant galaxies.

Lorgar sank to his knees and placed his palms flat on the mirrored floor as though afraid to let go. Magnus rested his hand on Lorgar's back, and when he lifted it away a sinuous cord of bright silver light, like spun thread, came with it.

'What do you see?' he asked, drawing more of the silver thread from Lorgar's form.

'*So many stars…*' said Lorgar, breathless at the infinite depths of the celestial vault. '*I feel as though I might lose my grip and never stop falling.*'

'And I might let you fall,' said Magnus as he pulled the silver cord tight. 'I have not yet decided.'

Lorgar cried out, and Magnus relished his understanding at what was being drawn from him. He was struggling to reel his soul back into his impossibly distant body, but Magnus shook his head and lifted a silver-wrapped fist.

'No, brother, you do not flee my dominion until you listen, *really* listen, to what I have to say.'

'*Brother, what are you doing?*' whispered Lorgar, his eyes fixed on the ever-expanding firmament.

Magnus walked clockwise around Lorgar, drawing ever more of the silver thread from his brother's spirit and using it to cast a *clavis argentum* circle about him. No longer was he a teacher, but a master berating a failed student.

'You look pale, Lorgar. No longer "the Golden One".'

'*Magnus, you are making a mistake.*'

'No, brother, it is you who are mistaken. About everything. You make a single, blundering pilgrimage into the warp and believe you alone can grasp its infinite complexities? You glimpse the dark heart of the universe and naively name it the Primordial Annihilator, as if that could explain even a fraction of its cosmic malevolence.'

'*I come to you as a brother. As a friend.*'

'You come looking to sway me to Horus' banner.'

'*Aye, that too. Was I wrong?*' snapped Lorgar. '*The Emperor betrayed you, put His executioner's blade to your neck and burned your world. Why do you even hesitate? You would sit at Horus' right hand, a prince of the Pantheon.*'

Magnus laughed. ‘You offer to make me a prince? I am already a king.’

‘*A king of what?*’ cried Lorgar. ‘*A world where your soul is bleeding to death, where your wealth of knowledge will turn to dust before you. The Pantheon can restore you and make you a god! It can undo the curse that blights your sons and bring your Legion back from the edge of extinction!*’

‘You barter what is not yours to offer, so listen well, *brother,*’ said Magnus. ‘Your soul is here only at my sufferance, borne over unimaginable distances and bound to your flesh by the slenderest of threads. You are like a child with a new toy, wielding powers you barely understand. Did you care that you cast your bloodied soul into an ocean of predators? You are prey to creatures of such rage and hunger that even the Red Angel would tremble before their might.’

Magnus looked up as his words summoned bleeding-edged wraiths of insatiable appetite. They pressed their inhuman essences into the gallery. Blind things with wet-meat faces and fang-filled maws. The light filling the gallery fled, the lustre of once pristine marble falling to the age-wearied ruins of a dead race drowned in its own blood.

Lorgar watched the feasters from afar descend, helpless to do anything other than listen. Magnus lifted the silver thread linking spirit and flesh, leaning down to whisper in his brother’s ear.

‘If I cut this, they will tear your soul apart.’

‘*Magnus, no,*’ said Lorgar. ‘*Don’t.*’

‘I will spare you, Lorgar, but you are no longer welcome on my world,’ said Magnus, looking up at the stars beyond the voracious entities and seeing a filial convergence. ‘My favoured son returns to me, and I have better things to do than waste time with the Warmaster’s envoy.’

Magnus released his grip on the silver thread and the argentum circle unravelled at the speed of thought. Lorgar’s spirit form faded as it fled across space and time to reunite with his body, and the predatory wraiths bawled at being denied so unique a feast.

‘Return to Horus,’ said Magnus. ‘He may call himself a god, but I place no faith in him.’

A storm greeted the *Khemet*’s return to the Planet of the Sorcerers. Ahriman crouched at the edge of a starboard embarkation deck and watched it burn the horizon around the Obsidian Tower. Emerald flames consumed thousands of the glittering manta-creatures and their ashes fell in a cascading borealis of released power, ready to be remade in some new form.

Such was this world’s eternal cycle of death and renewal.

‘One life ends and gives birth to the next,’ said Ahriman.

Magnus had taught him that extinction was not to be feared, that it was simply an opportunity for something else to exist.

Cold comfort to a dying Legion.

A Thunderhawk sat on launch rails behind Ahriman, raptor-prowed and with the swept wings of a prey hunter. The aircraft had not been built that way, but names had power and not even machines could resist the planet's transformative energies.

Lucius and Sanakht had already departed the *Khemet,* leaping from the embarkation deck to ride the singing manta-creatures to the surface. They made for Sanakht's blaze-topped tower, to hone their swordplay in preparation for the day when they would try to kill one another.

No sooner had they disappeared into the clouds than Hathor Maat entered the deck. He wore the power of this world well. Almost too well.

It made him taller, more vibrant. More dangerous.

A dozen servitors followed the Pavoni, bearing a pair of glass caskets between them in which lay the stasis-locked forms of Sobek and Menkaura.

Hathor Maat joined Ahriman at the edge of the deck, his eyes inevitably drawn to the primarch's tower.

'You're sure you want to go alone?' asked Hathor Maat.

He made it sound like concern for Ahriman, but it was a poor attempt to conceal a burning desire to be close to the primarch and bathe in his powerful resplendence.

'I am sure,' said Ahriman. 'Take Sobek and Menkaura to my tower. Keep Sobek in stasis, and send for Penthu to attend upon Menkaura.'

'Anything else? Do you want me to… prepare?'

'No. We will begin when I return from the Crimson King.'

Hathor Maat nodded, moving his mind into the fourth enumeration as his fingers evoked the symbol of Thothmes.

'Do you believe what you said to Menkaura? Do you really think you can save Sobek?'

Ahriman heard self-interest in the Pavoni adept's voice, and hated that it mirrored his own. Having seen Ohrmuzd consumed by the flesh change, Ahriman dreaded the curse that lay upon them more than death.

'I do not know, but I have to try.'

'Even after our father forbade it?'

Ahriman thought back to Temelucha, the warning she had given on the climb to the Iron Oculus. Was this defiance of his gene-sire's command the first step on a road that could have but one ending?

'Yes, for if I do not, who else will?'

Hathor Maat nodded, and the relief in his aura was palpable.

'Do you travel down with me?' asked Ahriman.

‘No, I will make my own way to the surface,’ said Hathor Maat, reaching out and extending his will into a nearby shoal of manta-creatures drawn to the *Khemet’*s void flare.

Their song changed as immaterial bones cracked and opalescent flesh was distorted like clay in the hands of a deranged sculptor. Scores of the creatures were unmade to base matter in moments, as though a spiteful god had chosen to reshape his creations in a fit of pique.

Hathor Maat’s power alloyed the raw stuff of the clouds with the substance of the flying creatures to craft an enormous gilded palanquin of flesh and bone. Ostentatious and ridiculously flamboyant, but second nature to a Pavoni.

‘Do you remember what I told you on Shrike?’ said Ahriman.

‘No.’

‘Liar.’

‘Of course I remember,’ sighed Hathor Maat. ‘Legiones Astartes first, psykers second.’

‘We forget that at our peril,’ said Ahriman.

‘You *still* caution restraint, Ahzek?’ said Hathor Maat.

‘On this world, after all that has befallen us? More than ever,’ said Ahriman. ‘Do not be blinded by this world’s seductions. Yes, its potential is all but limitless, but it can turn on you as the Wolves turned on us. You have seen what it can do to any one of us, the horrors of corrupt flesh we are forced to destroy. Is that what you want?’

‘No, but I have faith you will save us all, brother,’ said Hathor Maat, following the servitors and glass caskets onto his living palanquin. He nodded towards the Thunderhawk as he began his descent to the planet’s surface.

‘You cling to the old ways, Ahzek,’ said Hathor Maat, ‘but the old ways are gone.’

The old ways are gone…

Hathor Maat revelled in spite, and Ahriman was used to his tiresome petulance, but that last casual barb lodged in his soul. He climbed inside the Thunderhawk, its troop compartment bearing war trophies taken from the Torquetum.

Few now were the days this craft would be laden with battle-brothers. The inner panels of the fuselage were knife-carved with script, an old custom of the Legion. Thousands of cantrips copied from personal grimoires by warriors en route to battle.

The Iron Oculus stood upright in the centre of the crew compartment, secured in a web of tension wires. Nearer the prow, a dozen golden-skinned servitors and three yokai sat immobile in armoured bucket seats. The servitors stared sightlessly at the opposite bulkhead, the yokai at nothing at all. Their heads hung down over their chests, the sigils of invocatus dull and lifeless.

Ahriman still wasn't sure why he had brought the automata from the Torquetum. Without the animus of the warp entities they were useless, little better than armoured shells.

Ahriman put aside his unease at the sight of the Iron Oculus and made his way to the cockpit. The craft spooled up quickly, eager to be aloft on the aetheric winds. Its nose dipped as the launch rails elevated its engines and aimed it towards the opening in the *Khemet'*s flank.

Ahriman pushed out the throttle and the Thunderhawk leapt into the void, banking sharply downwards and executing a half-turn to clear projecting warp vanes and passive auspex arrays. The horizons rolled queasily, reminding him of the Torquetum's dizzying perspectives.

He pulled away from the *Khemet,* indulging himself for a moment as he matched the Thunderhawk's flight profile to the starship's vector.

A Nova-class frigate ornamented in filigree of gold and ivory, the *Khemet* bore the distinctive flourishes of Saturnian shipwrights, raked-back dorsal architecture and a narrower cross section than other Legion vessels. Its twin blade prows were curved in the manner of *khopesh* swords to either side of the ray-shielded barrel of its lance weapon.

It possessed a sleek grace few other Legion vessels could match, and boasted half a dozen specialised libraries of irreplaceable texts. Those libraries were now bare, emptied to fill the repositories of the Obsidian Tower, and sadness touched him at the notion of the *Khemet* bereft of wisdom.

Ahriman pulled away from the frigate as it sailed for the low-atmosphere berths where the paltry fleet assets left to the Thousand Sons were anchored. He eased the stick down, guiding the Thunderhawk through the clouds and pushed his senses out into the sky.

Who knew how the lay of the land had changed in his absence?

The ever-shifting boundaries between the sorcerers' towers made any descent to the surface perilous. The divisions between the Fellowships had always been sharply defined, but with Magnus withdrawing to his tower they had become fiercely territorial. With the waxing of fiery currents in the Great Ocean, the Pyrae had drawn close to the Obsidian Tower, and aggressively protected their newfound stature.

Ahriman felt the tug of the Thunderhawk's machine-spirit through the control column, an insistent urge to race skywards and punch the engines. The gunship could fly itself to the Crimson King, a loosed hawk returning to its master's hand, but Ahriman kept his grip firm on the controls as the planet's surface came into view.

Dominating the skyline was the Obsidian Tower, but the earth and sky were dreamscapes that made any perception of distance meaningless. Upon checking

the avionics panel, Ahriman would look up to see the black spire filling the canopy. At other times, a black cleft on a shimmering horizon was the only sign of it. As it always did, Magnus' abode would allow him ingress at a time of its own choosing.

Ahriman turned his attention to the volatile ground beneath the gunship. The plunging valleys and rocky hinterlands of the planet teemed with inhabitants, living flotsam and jetsam washed ashore by the psychic aftershocks still ravaging Prospero. Nor were refugees of his burned home world the only mortal inhabitants of the Planet of the Sorcerers.

The presence of Magnus was a lodestone to the galaxy's outcasts: the wretched, the betrayed, the abandoned, the lost and the damned. Every day brought fresh arrivals from places and times unknown.

A pack of lumbering ochre giants marched over the horizon, titanic god-engines with atomic hearts who had picked the locks of their very souls and thought themselves alive. Braying war-horns echoed mournfully over the wastelands, and were answered by the beasts that walked as men.

Monstrous brutes of fur and fang, the bestial creatures dwelled in a giant menhir city vomited up from the depths of the planet like the toppled ruins of the Ramesseum. Armoured in scavenged metal, they beat their breasts with clawed fists in honour of the god-machines, aping the nameless legionaries brooding in the basalt keep high above their rude city.

No one knew who these warriors were or from whence they had come. They had marched from a storm of terrifying power in their hundreds and raised a black fortress in the lightning-rich uplands. Scrying revealed them to be legionaries, but the myriad blazons flying upon their ragged banners and battle-scarred pauldrons were unknown.

Ahriman put the Thunderhawk into an arcing turn to port, seeing Amon's tower drift from the fractal fog. In truth, *tower* was a misnomer, for the primarch's equerry had crafted an immense clockwork pyramid, its peak crowned with crystalline vanes, arcing oculus lens arrays and intricate timepieces.

Like Ahriman, the primarch's equerry was Corvidae, and his frustrations at the waning of his seersight had driven him to explore ever more elaborate means of divination.

HE WASTES HIS TIME. YOU MUST KNOW THAT.

The Iron Oculus had remained silent on the return voyage from the Torquetum, but Ahriman sensed that was at an end.

'Few things to which Amon bends his power can be counted as a waste,' said Ahriman. Though he and Amon disagreed more and more often, he disliked the mocking tone of the captured seer.

AMON? YOU MEAN NAHUM?

‘No,’ said Ahriman, already regretting naming his brother.

Grating laughter echoed within the sarcophagus.

THE MARQUIS OF HELL. I KNOW HIS NAME, EVEN IF YOU DO NOT.

Ahriman said nothing as Amon’s floating pyramid passed from sight and the variegated clouds parted to reveal a vast plateau of volcanic rock. Baleful orange light seethed below its crazed surface, like a subterranean ocean of magma.

The Obsidian Tower rose from the centre of the plateau, a slender peak, monstrous and magnificent in equal measure. Molten light slithered wetly across its substance. Ahriman pulled back on the stick, spiralling up and around his sire’s peak. No point of entry immediately revealed itself, so he circled until the awesome mind inside consented to allow him within. The tower had an unfinished quality to it, like a flint spearhead hacked from a riverbed.

DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHY YOU BRING ME TO HIM?

‘Of course.’

TELL ME.

‘For knowledge,’ said Ahriman.

AND WHAT KNOWLEDGE DO YOU BELIEVE I POSSESS?

‘That is for the primarch to discover,’ said Ahriman. ‘The only good is knowledge and the only evil is ignorance.’

DO YOU TRULY BELIEVE THAT?

‘I do.’

***THEN YOU ARE AS BLIND AS YOUR SIRE, FOR NOT ALL KNOWLEDGE IS GOOD. A BETRAYAL REVEALED CAUSES PAIN. A MORE EFFECTIVE MEANS OF TORTURE HAS NO PURPOSE BUT EVIL. THE TECHNOLOGY OF EXTERMINATION EXISTS ONLY TO MURDER. HOW CAN SUCH THINGS BE COUNTED* GOOD?**

‘Knowledge is a tool and it is power,’ said Ahriman. ‘The power to harm *or* to heal. Any evil resides in those who wield it for selfish purposes.’

YOU SPEAK AS AN ARROGANT CHILD, AHZEK AHRIMAN. SOME KNOWLEDGE IS* NOT *GOOD, AND ONCE LEARNED CANNOT BE FORGOTTEN. REMEMBER THAT WHEN THE SECRETS I KEEP ARE REVEALED.

‘Whatever secrets you keep will soon belong to Magnus. He will empty you and when he has learned all there is to know, he will cast you back to the warp.’

JUST AS HE WILL DISCARD HIS SONS, WHEN HE IS DONE WITH YOU.

Ahriman laughed. ‘At least cloak your lies with a grain of truth, daemon. Magnus all but died to save us from the ravages of the Wolf King’s abominations, and you say he will abandon us?’

ALL *BUT DIED…? HOW GREAT YOU BELIEVE YOUR UNDERSTANDING, BUT HOW LITTLE YOU COMPREHEND.*

‘I know my father.’

NO SON EVER TRULY KNOWS HIS FATHER. JUST ASK HORUS.

‘I am done listening to you,’ said Ahriman. ‘Your kind are lies given life, spite revelling in seductive falsehoods to deceive and manipulate. The galaxy will be well rid of you.’

THE GALAXY WILL NEVER BE RID OF ME.

Ahriman laughed. ‘And you call *me* arrogant?’

WE ARE BOUND, YOU AND I. A SOUL YOU PROMISED, AND A SOUL I SHALL CLAIM.

Ahriman was spared from answering as he saw slabs of black basalt unfold from a gnarled outgrowth of the primarch’s tower to form a crooked stair. He brought the gunship around and killed thrust from the engines to hover by the final step.

‘We are here,’ he said. ‘All that you are now belongs to the Crimson King.’

FOUR

Hall of Amun Re
One apiece
Perturbations

Inconstancy was the Obsidian Tower's only true constant. Ahriman had stood within his father's halls many times, and never had he seen the same interior twice. Stepping through a triangular split in the volcanic face of the tower's exterior, he felt the geomantic order of the world flex.

In the blink of an eye he was *elsewhere.*

The Planet of the Sorcerers was gone.

Now Ahriman stood in what had once been a vast processional antechamber of orange stone. The structure was a ruin, its roof and most of its walls lost to the ravages of time and wars. Splintered obelisks and enormous columns of sun-baked limestone towered on either side, their bases heaped in drifts of sand. Visible between them, undulant desert stretched to the horizon, and blazing equatorial sunlight beat down from a sky of remorseless blue.

The structure's few remaining walls were fashioned from titanic blocks of pale stone and carved with eroded hieroglyphics that told of kingly deeds. Ebon statues stood upon pedestals of jade and marble – jackal-headed deities and androgyne god-kings with elaborate *deshret* crowns.

'Al-Uqṣur,' said Ahriman, recognising the great hypostyle hall within the Precinct of Amun Re.

Hot winds, freighted with the whispering secrets of a lost pillared city of the deep desert, gusted between the statues. Dust devils of sand scratched at his armour.

He turned to check the golden-servitors were still with him. They bore the dead weight of the Iron Oculus upon their shoulders as though bearing a fallen warrior to his rest. Wisps of aether sighed from its welded seams and clung to the metal in a glimmering haze.

Ahriman turned and marched along the hall. The dust devils followed him, whispering of the great secrets they knew. He ignored their babble, for such knowledge was fool's gold.

The servitors followed his steps, and the harsh sunlight gave their skin an otherworldly sheen. Ahriman removed his helm and took a breath of hot air. It tasted of spices, exotic meats, burned bread and rich waters from a fertile delta.

He saw many doors as he pressed onwards, some of banded timber, others of anachronistic silver-steel. They swung open at his approach and a voice issued from each one, a sound calculated to pierce the very heart of him.

The voice of Magnus the Red.

At first, each incarnation of the primarch's words invited him to enter with honeyed blandishments, but quickly resorted to strident demands. Yet more begged him to enter, offering profane wonders and alchymical formulae, but like the dust devils, what they promised was worthless. Still more berated him for ignoring them, demanding he obey his sire's command.

Some simply wept.

Ahriman knew this was not truly Magnus, not really. Echoes of the primarch's vast presence within the tower or perhaps simple aether ghosts skilled in mimicry. Though he paid their entreaties no heed, he could not help but glance through each door as it opened.

Beyond one churned a howling maelstrom of doomed stars, and Ahriman felt the terror of every soul as their far-distant galaxy perished. Another door opened onto a crumbling library, scorched black by an invader's torches. Cindered books fell from splintered shelves, gold leaf and cured hide falling to ash as he watched.

Another was an empty library where blank pages billowed like a snowstorm. Words screamed as ink bled from the pages like smoke. A final room resembled the primarch's chambers within the Pyramid of Photep, its bloodied floor covered in shards of broken glass, each reflecting an unblinking eye.

The last doors before he reached the hypostyle's terminus were lightless adamantium, sealed with chained locks of cold iron and warded with sigils cut from a living copy of *Arbatel de Magia Veterum.*

Things monstrous and insane slammed against these doors, but what was imprisoned within, Ahriman could not tell.

For once, a mystery he was happy to leave unknown.

Flanking the entrance to the Hall of Amun Re stood two identical statues of jet depicting a god with a crocodilian skull. Creeping verdigris stained the bronze of their armour and black dust poured from cracks in the carved stone. A tremor of unease worked its way down Ahriman's spine at their pertinence.

He raised his heqa staff as he felt gathering power and a warrior stepped from the shadows between the twinned idols.

'Brother Ahzek,' said the figure.

'Amon,' said Ahriman, recognising his fellow Corvidae by the apotropaic flare of his aura. Clad in crimson war-plate, Amon stood ramrod straight and held a silver staff topped with a serpentine sun out before him, as though to bar Ahriman entry.

With patrician features that had endured even the rigours of the legionary's transformation, Amon was hawk-nosed with oil-dark eyes and close-cropped hair of slate-grey. The very image of a regal praetor or consul.

Amon had been – and remained – the primarch's equerry, though Ahriman's former role as Chief Librarian was commonly held to be senior. Whether such distinctions of rank still carried any weight was something neither had yet fully tested.

'I bring a trophy for the primarch,' said Ahriman when Amon did not move to allow him entry to the Hall of Amun Re.

'So I see,' said Amon with a nod, passing him to examine the tomb of the Iron Oculus. He rapped his staff against the metal, and the echoes lingered too loud and too long.

'What is it? Another aether-bloated corpse? More books?'

'A seer,' said Ahriman. 'Don't you already know?'

Amon turned and fixed him with his gaze, so like that of a deep-water predator.

'Your eyes,' said Ahriman.

'My eyes? What about them?'

'Have they always been that dark? I cannot remember.'

'They are as they have always been.'

'No,' said Ahriman, closing the gap between them. 'Once they saw further than any in the Corvidae. Once they unweaved skeins of fate and fortune even I could not. How galling it must be to have the Pyrae in ascendance, to have your seersight hobbled like a mud-blind mortal.'

'You are as blind as I,' snapped Amon.

Ahriman smiled and stepped back. 'Not so, brother. I see a great deal. Like how you cling to the primarch's coat-tails like an errant son, how you fear to leave his side.'

'It is not fear,' said Amon. 'The primarch needs me.'

'Then tell me, *brother,*' said Ahriman, 'why have you not travelled the Great Ocean in your subtle body since we came here? Is it because you are afraid of what you might see?'

Now it was Amon's turn to smile.

'How great you believe your understanding, Ahzek,' he said. 'But how little you comprehend. So blinded by conceit that you do not see what is right in front of you.'

Ahriman flinched at the echo of recently heard words as Amon stood aside.

'Enter,' said Amon. 'The primarch awaits your return.'

Without its roof, the Hall of Amun Re was now more of an open plaza than the grand reading room it had once been. Spread at random across its red marble floor, now bleached pink by the eternal sun, were hundreds of wide tables stacked

with parchment. A hooded scribe sat at each table, feverishly scratching line after line of text.

None looked up as Ahriman and Amon entered.

At the centre of the reading room was a majestic figure englobed by a thousand floating books, their pages completely blank but filling more swiftly than any mortal could possibly be writing.

But Magnus the Red was no mortal wordsmith.

Clad in flowing robes of palest blue and gold, the Crimson King was simultaneously bathed in sunlight and radiating illumination.

His hair bound by a bronze circlet, Magnus' outflung arms looped and spun like a conductor's in the midst of a grand concerto. As each book was filled, it slammed shut and vanished before another appeared in its stead.

'My lord,' said Ahriman.

Magnus looked up and the scratching of quills ceased instantly. The floating sphere of books exploded outwards in a flare of magnesium light, and Ahriman felt a pang of loss at their sudden absence.

'Ahzek, my son,' said Magnus. 'You return to us successful.'

Ahriman nodded and struggled to find his voice as Amon took position at the primarch's side. After time in the material universe, to stand in Magnus' presence was intoxicating.

'We were,' he said at last, beckoning the servitors forwards. They lowered the Iron Oculus to the flagstones and stood the irregular sarcophagus upright. Black droplets ran in rivulets down the metal, but the power within was cowed to silence before the awesome might of the Crimson King.

Magnus approached the prize wrested from the Tartaruchi.

'*This* is the Iron Oculus?' he said, circling the sarcophagus and examining it as a *lanista* might once have examined a gladiator's physique. 'As spoken of in *Schøyen's Arcana?*'

'Yes.'

Magnus grinned. 'It is not as impressive as Schøyen led us to believe, is it?'

'No,' agreed Ahriman. 'But its power is great.'

Magnus looked up, intrigued.

'And you know this how?'

'The Torquetum's inhabitants resisted our taking of their seer,' said Ahriman. 'They fought with aether powers, and would have killed us but for Sobek evoking the Voydes of Drekhye.'

'A complex rapture for a mere Practicus,' said Amon.

'The tides of the Great Ocean waxed strong within the Torquetum,' said Ahriman, addressing his answer to Magnus. 'It was… seductive.'

‘How does Sobek’s conjuration equate to your knowledge of the Iron Oculus and its power?’ asked Magnus.

‘Sobek lost control of his invocatus and the voydes turned on him, my lord,’ said Ahriman. ‘The daemon within the sarcophagus augmented my casting of the Sign of Amaterasu to cast them back to the Great Ocean.’

‘A daemon *helped* you?’ said Amon. ‘Why?’

‘I do not know,’ said Ahriman, the lie falling lightly from his lips. He was reluctant to say more lest his tongue betray him and reveal the bargain he had struck.

‘Intriguing,’ said Magnus, leaning in to place his cheek against the sarcophagus. ‘And unexpected.’

He closed his eye and a slow smile spread across his features as his hands caressed the beaten metal. Ahriman felt the daemon inside recoil, a whipped cur recognising the hand of a new and powerful master.

‘Aforgomon?’ whispered Magnus with a wry chuckle. ‘Very well, that will suffice for now.’

Magnus stepped back from the Iron Oculus and returned his attention to Ahriman.

‘Voydes are fiends without mercy,’ said Magnus. ‘Does Sobek yet live?’

‘He does, my lord, but he and Menkaura were gravely injured during the fighting.’

‘Where are they now?’

Ahriman hesitated before answering.

‘Hathor Maat bears them both to my tower.’

Magnus cocked his head to one side, and Ahriman felt him cast his mind over the world like a net. Where before all his intellect had been directed inwards, now it raced across the surface of the Planet of the Sorcerers.

‘The flesh change came upon Sobek,’ said Magnus, his skin darkening and his scholarly robes transforming into crimson armour edged in ivory and silver. A horned breastplate carved with writhing serpents encircling an unwavering flame girdled his torso, hung with a kilt of boiled leather strips. A golden khopesh hung at his hip on a hand-tooled belt, alongside a chained grimoire of ancient magicks.

‘Yes, my lord,’ said Ahriman, forcing himself to look away from the *Book of Magnus.*

‘And what do you intend for poor Sobek?’

To lie would be impossible, so Ahriman spoke the truth.

‘I will try to save him.’

Magnus sighed, disappointed. ‘You remember my command to you, Ahzek?’ he said. ‘The words I spoke to you atop this very tower? The warning of my great displeasure should you go against me in this matter?’

Ahriman felt his gene-sire's power swell, looming over him as a heel might over an insect. It had been childishly naive to think he could keep Sobek's fate hidden.

'I remember, my lord.'

'Not well enough, it seems,' said Amon.

Magnus placed a paternal hand on Ahriman's shoulder, guiding him towards the rows of tables and silent scribes. Amon followed five steps behind.

'My son,' he said, 'you rail against my ruling, believing I am wrong and thinking you can save Sobek. You think you can save *all* those who fall, but you cannot. You would damn them more grievously than they are already cursed.'

'I cannot just give up on my brothers,' said Ahriman.

'Trust me, Ahzek, a bullet in the head will be a mercy to Sobek. Long ago, I all but destroyed myself seeking to repair the flaw in our making, but every cure was worse than the disease. Even what I believed to be salvation was but a doom an eternity in the making.'

'Surely here we can find a way to undo our curse,' said Ahriman, turning back to the Iron Oculus. 'Is that not why you scour the galaxy and send us forth to retrieve these artefacts, these madmen and seers? Is that not why we gather all knowledge?'

Magnus shook his head sadly. 'No, my son. That is not why you gather these things.'

'Then why?' demanded Ahriman.

'Watch your tone, Ahriman,' said Amon, his hand clasping the hilt of his khopesh. Magnus raised a hand to still his equerry's ire.

'I assumed you understood,' said Magnus as the hooded scribes resumed their work and the Hall of Amun Re echoed to the scratching of quills. 'For the sake of knowledge itself. For wisdom's preservation I collect the truth of all things, because what I have discovered must never be forgotten. It must be set down for the generations yet to come, for upon such knowledge does the greatness and hope for humanity's future rest.'

Magnus led Ahriman deeper into the maze of tables, letting his fingers brush trailing parchments. And where they travelled, words flowed in streams of enlightenment. None of the scribes looked up from their labours, for which Ahriman was suddenly and profoundly grateful.

'The future?' he said. 'Our Legion is on the verge of extinction. Unless you help me save it, we *have* no future.'

Ahriman's frustration boiled over and he swept stacked parchments from the nearest table, scattering them to the marbled floor.

'Leave the keeping of records for when Horus and the Emperor cease their war-making! *Then* there will be time enough for others to rebuild and relearn

what might have been lost!'

'You speak of others?' said Magnus, returning the papers to the table with a snap of his fingers. 'To whom among my brothers or the Imperium would you entrust so monumental a task? The Lion? True, he is a scholar at heart, but too wedded to his mysteries. He would pick and choose what knowledge to reveal, keeping the greatest secrets for himself. Roboute? Too hidebound to see the virtue in unrestricted freedom of knowledge. Nor would Rogal, Jaghatai or Corvus share my vision. And Vulkan is too rooted in earth and rock to lift his gaze to the stars. I might once have trusted Sanguinius, but he walks a path that leads only to blood and madness.'

'You speak only of our enemies,' said Ahriman. 'Those who seek our destruction.'

'Sadly, yes,' said Magnus, pausing beside one of the hooded scribes. 'Horus has aligned himself with the broken and the lost, and what appetite have such creatures for learning?'

Ahriman said nothing, watching the scribe's quill dart across the page, the cursive nature of the letters horribly familiar. He had devoted years of study to it in the book that hung from Magnus' belt.

'Who are they?' he asked. 'What are they writing?'

'Shards of my remembered self,' said Magnus. 'Every piece of me that recalls a volume from Prospero and every missive I have read. All the things I have seen and learned that are yet within me. I must set it all down before the sun sets and all that I am is forgotten.'

'No,' said Ahriman as the scribe lifted his head. 'I do not want to see.'

'You must, for of all my sons, you need to make your peace with the reality of our plight most of all.'

Ahriman shook his head. 'No.'

'Look,' said Magnus and Ahriman obeyed.

The scribe pulled back his hood, and Ahriman saw the face of Magnus the Red, but ravaged and gaunt as though drained of vitality. The scribe with his father's visage stared back at him, his single eye unblinking and without comprehension. Ahriman tore his gaze from this monstrous doppelganger as every one of the scribes revealed himself to be a splintered fragment of the Crimson King's soul.

The sight of the primarch broken into pieces was heartbreaking, a violation of something beautiful and divine.

'I need to remember it all,' said Magnus, and now Ahriman heard the soul-sick weariness in his father's voice, an echoing quality that grew with each breath. 'Before the end.'

Silence.

To a warrior of the Athanaeans, there was no such thing. A telepath endured a cacophony of stray thoughts every moment of every day. The greatest practitioners were those able to pluck meaning from the tumult without going entirely mad.

Here in the crystal forest was as close to silence as Sanakht had ever experienced. It was why he had raised his tower here, a gracile spire of fluted ivory and mother-of-pearl like a narwhal's horn.

Blue fire burned atop its cupola, sending capering shadows dancing through the glittering forest surrounding it. Slender-limbed trees of lambent glass swayed in sighing winds that made music through their branches. Giggling sparks of *ignis fatuus* leapt from branch to branch, mindless scraps that buzzed like insects within Sanakht's mind.

'Do you really think you can hide from me?' called Sanakht.

The darting sprites carried his words through the trees, but no reply was forthcoming. Not that Sanakht had expected one.

Lucius was too wily to fall for so transparent a ruse.

'Your thoughts betray you, swordsman,' he said. 'I can hear them roaring in your skull. How can you stand it?'

Sanakht held his swords low at his thighs, twin blades of black and white trailing corposant as he stepped lightly between the trees. They parted before him, easing his passage as they would hinder his quarry.

He moved in perfect balance, his awareness of his surroundings attuned to anything out of place. His focus before him was pin-sharp, his peripheral vision alert to movement where there should only be stillness.

The swordsmen's last duel had seen Lucius victorious, Sanakht's power to read minds useless against such inhuman speed. Ahriman's intervention had prevented Lucius from killing him, but left a debt of blades between them.

Was this the time for it to be settled?

A ripple of amusement rustled through the trees. Spiteful laughter. Lucius or some capricious sprite? Sanakht turned in a low circle, his swords slowly rising as he extended his thoughts through the forest.

There. Ahead and to the left.

A jagged spike of lethal intent. A mind so attuned to killing it was a blade itself. Lucius was a master of murder, but he was too egotistical, too narcissistic and too much in love with death to completely mask his towering arrogance.

'There you are,' whispered Sanakht.

He slowed his breathing, rolling his shoulders and lifting his thoughts to the third enumeration. Some in the Legion favoured the eighth for battle, but Sanakht preferred the clarity of the lower enumerations. The world around him became sickeningly sharp, every detail achingly more *real.*

The irony of that was not lost on Sanakht.

Whisper-thin branches became lethal monofilaments, every gritty fragment a fractal of interlocking geometric planes. Every exhalation became a weather system of infinite complexity churned by breath. Motes of dust became cometary in shafts of light, leaving vortices of displaced radiance in their wake.

'*I'm not trying to hide from you,*' came a voice.

Its source was ambiguous, seeming to come from every direction and none. Sanakht adopted a combat stance, still circling, still moving forwards as he scanned the trees for anything out of place. Anything that might give him a clue to Lucius' position.

'*I* want *you to find me.*'

'Then show yourself,' said Sanakht. 'Let us finish this.'

'*Show myself?*' Lucius laughed. '*I'll do better than that. You want to look inside my mind, go ahead.*'

The horror of his thoughts slammed into Sanakht. His mind buckled at the force of it all – hot knives, tearing hooks and violated flesh. A cavalcade of perversity masquerading as passion. Grotesqueries of flayed meat and bone, toxic abominations that revelled in self-inflicted deformities. Daemonic horrors once thought of as repugnant now welcomed to stave off the banality of existence.

...a woman who wore her scars on the inside...

...broken glass cutting the meat of his face...

...flayed things revelling in their agonies...

...emerald-hued ghosts on a doomed alien world...

...a raven-winged warrior with plunging swords...

This last memory drove Sanakht to his knees with repercussive pain. His vision greyed as twin spears of white heat plunged past his collarbones and into his chest cavity.

'How are you alive?' he gasped. 'The raven's blades should have killed you!' He rose through the enumerations to cast out the loathsome touch of the swordsman's wretched mind.

'That's what I came here to find out,' said Lucius, springing from a haze of light before Sanakht. His sword cut the air in a silver arc. A decapitating strike.

Arrogant and ostentatious.

Sanakht rolled and brought his swords up in a scissoring movement. He caught the descending blade and twisted. Lucius spun away to keep hold of his weapon, swaying aside from Sanakht's return strike.

'Very good,' said Sanakht. 'You almost had me.'

'Did you like what you saw?' said Lucius, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet as they circled one another.

‘It was… instructional,’ said Sanakht. ‘What happened to your Legion? The things I saw…’

‘It’s a long story,’ said Lucius, his scarred face alive in the light of the trees.

‘You did that to yourself, didn’t you? The scars.’

‘I did,’ agreed Lucius, his sword spinning in a figure of eight. ‘It seemed like a good idea at the time.’

‘Why?’

‘Would you believe it was because of a woman?’

‘The painter?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Did you kill her?’

‘You saw inside my mind – you tell me.’

Sanakht shook his head as the bad taste of a memory that wasn’t his swam to the surface. ‘You didn’t need to – she was ready to do it to herself.’

‘What can I say? I have that effect on–’

Sanakht didn’t let him finish. He launched himself at Lucius, his black-bladed sword lancing for the swordsman’s neck. Lucius sidestepped, his sword sweeping down to block the crystal blade. Sanakht spun on his heel and cracked his elbow against Lucius’ cheek.

He reeled, and Sanakht gave him no chance to recover. Sweeping his opponent’s blade to the side, he punched Lucius full in the face with the quillons of his sword. Bone cracked.

Lucius sprang away, spitting a mouthful of blood. He grinned and his lizard-like tongue swept over sharpened teeth.

But Sanakht wasn’t done yet. There would be no warrior’s banter between blows. Not this time. He pressed the attack, pushing past the filth of Lucius’ uppermost thoughts to read the unconscious reflexes empowering him.

Sanakht had underestimated Lucius the last time they had crossed blades, but he would never do so again.

Lucius backed away, his speed and control no match for the purity of Sanakht’s preternaturally sharpened skills. Lucius was keeping the blades of dark and light from his neck, but it could not last.

When the end came, it came quickly.

Sanakht’s black blade sliced into Lucius’ side. A leg hooked behind his knee and the swordsman was falling backwards. He landed hard and Sanakht was on him a heartbeat later. Crouched over his chest, Sanakht pinned Lucius’ sword arm with one knee and pressed the other down on his neck.

The powered edge of Sanakht’s sword blistered the skin of Lucius’ throat.

‘I told you I would defeat you.’

‘If you die too, does it count as a victory?’ said Lucius.

Sanakht looked down and saw the tip of Lucius' sword poised just below his ribs at the thinnest section of his armour. A single thrust and it would tear through his lungs and hearts before erupting from his gullet.

'What say you, Sanakht, do we die together?' asked Lucius, increasing the pressure of his blade. 'I've already done it once, but it didn't take. Will you be so fortunate?'

Sanakht uncoiled from his crouch, his swords spinning in his grip as he sheathed them. Lucius sprang to his feet, massaging the scorched patch of skin at his neck.

'One apiece, then,' he said.

Sanakht didn't reply, his attention drawn heavenwards as the sky split and three gothic leviathans dropped through the clouds. Warp lightning haloed their sickled prows and empyreal fire burned on sigils etched into their armoured flanks.

'The *Photep,*' said Sanakht, hardly daring to believe what he was seeing could be real. 'The *Ankhtowë* and *Kymmeru…*'

'Friends of yours?' asked Lucius.

'The *Photep* was the Crimson King's flagship,' said Sanakht. 'Despatched from Prospero on the eve of the Wolves' attack.'

Yet more vessels joined the three battle-barges: strike cruisers, frigates, destroyers and flocks of Stormbirds. All bearing the red-and-ivory livery of the Thousand Sons.

'The lost fleets have returned,' said Sanakht.

Magnus and Amon watched the return of the Legion fleets from the workshop beneath the peak of the equerry's clockwork pyramid. Dozens of vessels bearing full battle companies of Thousand Sons cut through the storm clouds on a constant bearing towards the Obsidian Tower.

'I never thought to see so beautiful a sight,' said Amon.

'Nor I, my friend,' said Magnus. 'Nor I.'

Amon looked askance at his primarch.

'You did not send them?' he asked.

'No. This is not my doing.'

'Then how can they be here?'

Magnus did not answer and to Amon's surprise turned from the fleets, walking back into the workshop. Amon lingered a moment longer, counting the returning warships and tallying the likely numbers they brought back to the Legion.

Three thousand at least, perhaps even five.

He turned from the glorious vision of a restored Legion fleet and followed Magnus. Though raised by psychic might and wrought from aether, the space within his sanctum was as real as any in the material universe. Every sense

carried memory: the feel of its brass structure, the ticking behind moulded brass panels, the smell and taste of alchymical components.

Thaumaturgical charts hung from the angled walls, alongside overfilled bookshelves, printed tables of ephemeris and charts of conflicting observations concerning the nine suns. Amon's workbenches were heaped with broken astrolabes, equatorium and hideously complex astrarium. Deformed skeletons and knucklebones lay side by side on wooden boards carved with sigils of prognostication.

At the centre of the chamber sat a flat, oval boulder hewn from the rock of the Reflecting Caves. A chunk of black spinel set at its heart resembled the dilated pupil of an eye.

'Are the tides still ranged against you?' said Magnus, kneeling before the icon and staring into its depths.

'The Great Ocean yet favours the Pyrae, my lord,' said Amon, unrolling measurements of celestial oceanics and currents akin to an ancient seafaring chart. 'But our time will come again.'

'Yes, I expect it will,' agreed Magnus, standing and moving through the workshop, pausing now and then to examine the broken tools of divination. He grinned as he lifted a crystal sphere and rubbed a palm over its curves, blowing dust from its surface.

'My lord?' said Amon.

'Yes?' said Magnus, replacing the crystal ball.

'Only three of the flagships you despatched have returned.'

'Yes, I saw that,' said Magnus, moving to a skeleton shaped by infernal evolution. 'The *Scion of Prospero* is missing.'

'Do you know where it is?'

'The ghosts of Tizca say we will never see it again. They say it goes to die at the world of the Sovereign Queen.'

'I know of no such world.'

'Nor I,' said Magnus, discarding the skeleton and picking up a wire-frame orrery. 'Does that surprise you?'

'At any other time, it would have, yes,' admitted Amon. 'But now? Knowing what I know of the wound Russ smote you? No, it does not, and I fear for what that means.'

'For me?'

'For all of us,' said Amon, taking an aexactor's ledger from a bookcase of black ash. 'It is why I asked you here.'

He swept aside a collection of cracked lenses and crystalline loupes from a workbench and opened the book. Magnus joined him and scanned the endless columned numbers and encoded script.

‘A *Liber Prospero?*’ said Magnus.

‘Yes, an index of all the knowledge we have been able to save from Prospero so far. And all the knowledge I believe we *can* save.’

‘Why are you showing me this?’ asked Magnus.

‘Because even if we save everything listed in this book, it will only be a fraction of what we once knew.’

Amon looked up. ‘But you already know that, don’t you?’

Magnus sighed and closed the *Liber Prospero*.

‘Of course I know.’

Amon returned to the Icon of the Corvidae, walking a circle around it while holding one palm over the dark spinel at its centre. The image of a vast pyramid of shimmering glass, chrome and steel appeared, so real he felt he could reach out and touch it.

‘The Pyramid of Photep,’ said Magnus.

Sunlight played across the glittering pyramid, its glass glowing amber in a typical Prosperine sunset. Shadows of clouds passed over its surface and Amon saw Tizca’s gold-and-marble glory reflected in the mirror facade.

That same pyramid was now a rusting steel skeleton, a sagging, corroded ruin in the wastelands, haunted by bitter echoes and ghosts of Prospero’s death.

Amon felt an ache of loss such as he had not felt since coming to this terrible world. Rebuilding the libraries had consumed his every thought and, until now, kept grief at bay.

‘I remember the pyramid’s construction,’ said Amon, and now the sounds of seabirds filled the workshop. Warm siroccos fluttered the charts on the walls. ‘You could have raised it overnight, my lord, but as Ahzek is fond of pointing out, there is virtue in the act of doing something by hand.’

Magnus walked around the image of the pyramid as it swung down to the base, where colossal angled beams of silvered adamantium met in a confluence of enormous bolts and steel bracing ties.

Amon lifted the recreation of the pyramid into the air, turning it with graceful movements of his fingertips.

‘When any structure of great complexity is built, the most obsessively precise task must be the positioning and fixing of the vast girders that form the foundations of its frame. The margin of error involved in their positioning is minute. Any deviation at this stage, a hole drilled a few millimetres askew or an angle miscalculated by a fraction of a degree, will have dramatic consequences later.’

The view zoomed up the height of the pyramid to where transverse tension bars offset the compressional forces produced by the main structural elements.

‘Five hundred metres up, those insignificant few millimetres have become a twenty-metre deviation. Small perturbations we miss or ignore, tiny flaws we regard as inconsequential… They have far-reaching consequences. As above, so below.’

‘No such thing happened with the Pyramid of Photep,’ pointed out Magnus. ‘It was perfect.’

‘It was,’ agreed Amon, allowing the image of the pyramid to collapse in on itself.

‘Then what purpose does this serve?’

‘Because I know what is happening to you,’ said Amon. ‘I know you are dying.’

FIVE

Saviour
Rewriting the code
The veil of grief

The aether matter of Ahriman's tower had reshaped its form in his absence. His power had raised a spiralling horn of white stone, but left to its own devices, the tower had become an ugly agglomeration of polyhedral impossibilities.

Its interior was a twisted labyrinth of doors to nowhere, infinite pathways and endlessly tessellating chambers nesting within one another in defiance of perspective.

Atop the tower's highest chamber, Ahriman walked a slow circuit of its perimeter, scoring the walls with a black-bladed athame to inscribe the Sign of Thothmes. The wonder he hoped to work was to remain hidden for now.

The raven cloak of his Fellowship mantled his shoulders, and he bore as many touchstones of prophecy as he possessed: a scarlet robe woven by the Mother Oracles of Iyalawo, agate from the Reflecting Caves, a wooden eye cut from the hull of a *Levantine* barque, the waxen seal of the *Mirabilis Liber*.

The floor was polished basalt, cut with nine concentric circles. Robed in the hooded raiments of their Fellowships, Hathor Maat and Sanakht walked in opposition to one another, pouring lunar caustic into the circular grooves, innermost to outermost.

At the centre of the warding circles stood a frosted stasis casket. Sobek remained just as Ahriman had last seen him on the Torquetum, terrified features frozen by Pavoni artes and held in that moment by the power of technology.

Fresh from his work healing Menkaura, Apothecary Penthu knelt by a hinged panel in the casket's side. Insulated cables linked his narthecium gauntlet to its inner workings.

'It's done,' said Sanakht, wiping the last grains of powder from his palms. All nine circles glittered like diamond dust in the light of fires held within floating crystal thuribles.

'You are sure?' asked Ahriman, sheathing the athame.

'It is but a simple ward circle,' said Sanakht.

'There can be no errors.'

'Says the adept who broke his own ward circle,' said Hathor Maat. 'Remember how easily Astennu goaded you?'

Ahriman nodded. The comment was fair. He *had* allowed a warrior corrupted by the flesh change to provoke him into an elementary error.

‘That will not happen again.’

‘It better not,’ said Hathor Maat. ‘Or I’ll have Sanakht here put his pretty swords through you.’

Ahriman ignored the threat and turned to Penthu.

‘Apothecary?’

Penthu toggled a final switch and nodded as a series of gem-lights changed from green to amber.

‘It is ready,’ he said, standing and turning to face Ahriman. ‘The integral medicae functions are primed to take over as soon as the field disengages, but I want you to know that I do not approve of this.’

‘You would rather we did this without you?’ asked Ahriman.

‘No. If you cannot halt what is happening to Sobek then I will see him ended with mercy instead of in the Pyrae’s fire.’

‘Which is to your credit, but I do not believe it will come to that,’ said Ahriman.

Penthu grunted, and unholstered his bolt pistol anyway.

‘Sanakht? Hathor Maat?’ said Ahriman. ‘Ready?’

‘I am,’ replied the swordsman, standing directly in front of Sobek’s casket.

‘Let’s get this done,’ said Hathor Maat, taking up position to Sanakht’s left and rolling his shoulders as though about to go into battle.

Ahriman stood to Sanakht’s right, his thought processes becoming more fluid and abstract as he sought to push past *now* and perceive *yet to be.*

‘Both of you move your minds into the second enumeration,’ said Sanakht, a mist of power gathering behind his eyes and sighing from his lips.

‘Not the third?’ asked Ahriman.

‘No, the second allows transfer of thought at near-instantaneous speeds. It is my understanding this needs to be swift, yes?’

‘Absolutely,’ agreed Ahriman. ‘Speed is vital. Hathor Maat, you must follow my visions immediately.’

‘Show me the way and I’ll guide Sobek back to us.’

The silver of the circles took on a shimmering, undersea quality as all three adepts drew the power of the Great Ocean into their bodies.

‘Apothecary,’ said Ahriman. ‘Disengage the stasis field.’

Penthu pressed a combination of gene-locks on the casket’s side, and the field vanished. Preserved air from the Torquetum gusted outwards, bearing Sobek’s last breath. Hathor Maat grunted as the burden of restraining his hyper-evolution now fell to him.

Sobek’s eyes snapped open, wide with fear.

‘Ahriman!’ he cried. ‘It’s here. Stop…’

Blue ice webbed the floor. The carven sigils on the walls burned with Hathor Maat’s expended power.

‘Hurry,’ said the Pavoni adept through gritted teeth.

‘Do it,’ said Ahriman. ‘Conjoin.’

Sanakht lifted his arms and placed a palm on Ahriman and Hathor Maat’s shoulders, a conduit between Corvidae seersight and Pavoni biomancy. Ahriman drew in a frozen breath at the chill of Athanaean power, like razor steel sheathed in ice. Shadows slithered on the walls, things from beyond sensing the gathering power within. The Sign of Thothmes would keep them out for now, but not indefinitely.

‘Quickly. Open your thoughts,’ said Sanakht, his voice like clear water slipping over time-smoothed stone. ‘I am the key and the gate, the end and the beginning, the twisting path where two minds become one.’

Ahriman felt the infinite complexity of his brothers’ minds join with his own, the ordered precision of Sanakht’s and the maze of ever-shifting perspectives that was Hathor Maat’s. The Pavoni had a changeling mind of innumerable facets, already slipping its moorings as it prepared to do battle with the flesh change.

‘We are one,’ said Sanakht.

It felt like leaping from a cliff.

Letting go of the present and casting his mind into the future was to abandon certitude and plunge into an infinite ocean with only the slenderest tether to guide him home.

All too easy to be carried far from familiar shores by the Great Ocean’s onrushing tides, beguiled by the prospect of witnessing futures so far distant that the anchor of the present was ripped away.

And a mind untethered could never return to its body.

Ahriman moved his mind into Sobek’s flesh, feeling the screaming ambition of his body straining at the bounds of Hathor Maat’s power. His own flesh responded, eager to cast off the stolid nature of its own rigid form. He savagely quashed its hunger for change, following the billions of potentials branching out from the genetic anarchy of Sobek’s anatomy. Every change produced millions of possibilities, and these multiplied at a geometric rate every second.

In some futures, the changes caused Sobek to bloat with tumours, flesh splitting and new limbs exploding from the morass of warp-infused meat. Others saw him assume variations on a specific form: avian, winged and yet somehow reptilian.

Ahriman discarded scores of futures in every heartbeat, shifting his focus as it became clear each ended with Sobek’s death. Hundreds of potential futures

flashed through his mind, each a screaming nightmare of bulging veins, organs exploding and flesh reshaping in ever more horrific ways.

Sweat streamed from him, but he barely felt it. To seek one future amongst a potentially infinite number was a feat to tax even the greatest of the Corvidae. Since coming to this world, he had not found a cure, but the blood-toll of his researches had shown him definitive markers beyond which even transhuman physiology expired. Ahriman discarded such futures instantly, exploring those that offered fractionally more hope. Each blood and pain-filled death he had witnessed taught its own lesson in suffering, lessons that might yet save Sobek.

And if one could be saved, *all* could be saved.

+Give me something to work with,+ sent Hathor Maat.

+I can find nothing,+ he replied.

Futures branched and divided faster than he could follow. He viewed as many as he could, knowing it would never be enough.

+There must be something!+

+Every change I see kills him.+

+I can't hold it back much longer!+ said Hathor Maat. +Just find the best you can.+

+The tiniest misstep will have enormous ramifications I cannot predict.+

+He dies either way, so just choose, damn you!+

Ahriman steeled himself to make hard choices. He had eliminated millions of potential futures, but that still left him with a bewildering number of possibilities. Left with no other recourse, he calculated the odds of each option and sent Maat the alterations to Sobek's genetic structure that offered the best chance of survival.

+I see it!+ said Hathor Maat.

Biomantic power surged from Hathor Maat's mind, plunging into the deepest elements of Sobek's physiology, breaking apart cells and the very building blocks of existence.

Held fast by the casket's restraints, Sobek thrashed in agony as Hathor Maat's power ripped through him. The Pavoni artes were tearing him to pieces before rebuilding him from his core. Ahriman felt the soul-breaking agonies of his Practicus and shut them away in the deepest recesses of his psyche.

To feel what Sobek was feeling would be too much to bear.

+Stop this!+ cried Apothecary Penthu. +You're killing him!+

+We're saving him!+ roared Hathor Maat.

+Ahriman, end this!+ demanded Penthu.

+No. We stop when it is done,+ said Ahriman.

The fates were changing according to his foresight, and repercussive pain raced around his body as the seismic shifts in Sobek's physiology echoed within his

own flesh.

+I am ending this,+ said Penthu, raising his pistol to Sobek's forehead.

Ahriman's hand shot out and the bolt pistol instantly disassembled itself into its component parts. Shells, slides, magazine, cheek plates, muzzle and trigger guard clattered to the basalt floor.

+We stop when it is done,+ repeated Ahriman.

+Damn you and your arrogance, Ahzek!+

Ahriman ignored the Apothecary's fury. It was a distraction and he had no time for distractions. With every alteration Hathor Maat made, fresh branching possibilities opened up and he soared as the morass of futures that ended in horrific death for Sobek dropped exponentially.

+It's working!+ he cried.

Sobek howled in pain, his body spasming with agonies of the damned. The casket's medicae systems shrieked with alarms. Biohazard warning symbols appeared on every one of its slates.

+Don't stop!+ replied Hathor Maat, the strain evident in his mind as it began to buckle under the pressure of rewriting the Emperor's code of life itself. Hathor Maat exulted in his power as it reshaped Sobek and shut down every aberrant avenue of unnatural evolution.

Human beings had been altering the evolution of lower species for millennia, but never with instantaneous results. Early artificial selection had domesticated wild beasts and plants since time immemorial, yet this was surely the greatest example of humanity's ingenuity.

Sobek's fate was becoming more certain with every passing moment. Ahriman strained at the limits of his power, and Sanakht's arms trembled with the effort of maintaining the telepathic bridge. Maat was triumphant, knowing that none before him had ever accomplished so magnificent a feat.

The biomancy of the Pavoni was a wondrous gift, but its boons were usually fleeting. The natural tendency of life was to maintain its form and function. Life resisted change not its own, but *this*… this was the irrevocable altering of the most complex living form imaginable: gene-code authored by the Emperor of Mankind.

Who but the Thousand Sons dared tamper with the blueprints of His creations?

Despite the pain of Sobek's rebirth, Ahriman grinned.

Hathor Maat was going to be insufferable after this.

At last he saw what he had been searching for since they had come to the Planet of the Sorcerers – a means to reverse the irreversible. Sobek's fate was his own again, no longer dominated by rampant mutations and the agonies of horrific transformation. The branching fate lines were falling away like fragments of a shedding chrysalis.

+It is done,+ he sent to Hathor Maat.

Sanakht dropped his arms, gripping the hilts of his swords as though taking strength from them.

Ahriman flinched as the bridge linking him to Hathor Maat was broken. A curious mix of relief and regret settled upon him. Maat's mind was not a place to linger any longer than necessary, but feeling power that could reshape life and govern its development was to know the reach of a god.

An intoxicating feeling, the seductions of which were all too obvious. No wonder the bodies of the Pavoni were always in flux. No wonder they were all strutting peacocks.

Hathor Maat let out a bray of exhausted laughter and sank to his knees, drained almost to destruction by their magnificent achievement.

'We did it!' he said, hoarse yet elated.

Ahriman nodded and blinked away the monstrous after-images of fates that would never now come to pass, horrors beyond any he had seen staring into the depths of the Great Ocean or encountered on alien worlds.

Sobek hung limp in the casket, his head low over his chest, his flesh waxen and glossy with oily sweat. Rasping breaths shuddered from his lungs and the veins in his neck squirmed like angry serpents. Even from several metres away, Ahriman felt transhuman heat radiating from his skin.

'Apothecary?' he said. 'Is he right? Sobek lives?'

Penthu's narthecium had remained connected to the stasis casket's medicae systems throughout, and his eyes darted back and forth as he processed vast swathes of information.

'Every biometric is dangerously elevated, but yes, it appears you have managed to avoid killing him,' said Penthu grudgingly.

'*Avoid killing him?*' said Hathor Maat. 'Throne, we *saved* him! There's no Apothecary alive could do what we just did.'

'We don't yet know what you did,' said Penthu.

'Then you would have let him die?'

'I would not be so reckless with another's life,' snapped Penthu. 'Not when the true cost remains to be seen.'

'Then you are a coward,' said Hathor Maat.

'Enough,' said Ahriman. 'We succeeded, let that stand as testament to our achievement. Let us–'

Sobek's head snapped up.

'All… is… dust,' he said.

The last of the sigils on the wall exploded in a blizzard of aether-fire. The Great Ocean's tides surged into the chamber with all the spite of a jealous lover come to claim their due.

Sobek's eyes bulged and his mouth stretched wide. Sinews snapped and cartilage cracked as breath roared from his throat with furnace heat.

Ahriman spun Hathor Maat to face him.

'What is this?'

'Nothing of my doing!' said Hathor Maat, pulling away.

Cherry-red light built behind Sobek's eyes and the heat of burning flesh drove Penthu back. The casket rocked with Sobek's convulsions as his face was seared black with internal fires. His screams were piteous, enduring beyond what should be possible. Bones fused and snapped in the heat of this new and terrible transfiguration. The searing fire in his eyes grew too bright to look upon.

Sobek gave one last shrieking wail, a cry heard all across the Planet of the Sorcerers.

The chamber fell silent, save for a soft rustling like sand through an hourglass.

Ahriman looked up and despair touched him.

Sobek was gone. All that remained was his armour, split and broken by the power that destroyed him. Dust poured from the cracks, and no crematorium had ever been so thorough in its destruction of a human body.

Drifts of grey heaped around the armour's boots as the dust spilled from the casket. Capricious winds stirred it, and Sobek's presence in the world faded like a guilty whisper.

'I do not understand,' said Ahriman.

'What is to understand?' said Penthu. 'You killed him.'

'No, this was not his fate,' said Ahriman, unwilling to admit defeat. 'I would have seen it. I saw his flesh remade. I saw him returned to us.'

Ahriman felt the vast presence within his tower an instant before it spoke.

'You were deceived, my son,' said Magnus the Red.

And suddenly he was there, the Crimson King in all his wisdom, resplendent in golden robes and feathered cloak. Red of skin and keen of eye, Magnus was clad as he had been in the moments before Prospero's razing.

Ahriman knew he should kneel, should prostrate himself on the floor and beg for mercy. Instead, he remained standing. What use was humility in the face of his primarch's wrath? Success would have vindicated his actions, but failure had damned him as surely as it had Sobek.

'My lord,' he said.

'Ahzek,' said Magnus. 'You disobeyed me.'

'My lord, we were so close, we almost–'

'*Silence!*' roared Magnus, and the walls of the tower were torn away with the force of his fury. Storm clouds filled the sky to the horizon, the primarch's rage made manifest in the heavens. 'I should strike you down where you stand for this betrayal.'

‘If it is betrayal to try to save my brothers’ lives when you leave them to die, then yes, name me traitor,’ said Ahriman, made bold by having nothing left to lose. ‘Do with me as you will.’

He felt the limitless power of Magnus surround him, power that could crush him from existence in the blink of an eye.

‘You will pay for Sobek’s life another time, Ahzek,’ warned Magnus, ‘but for now, Amon requires this *cabal* of yours.’

Ahriman let out a breath as he understood he was not to die at his father’s hands this day. He felt the killing power of the Great Ocean bleed away and nodded.

‘By your command,’ he said. ‘We go to the Obsidian Tower.’

‘No,’ said Magnus. ‘Amon is not there.’

‘Then where?’

‘Go to the ruins of Tizca,’ said Magnus. ‘To the last moments of Prospero’s doom.’

The Thunderhawk touched down in a graveyard of black ash.

Its skids kicked up powdered bone and woke the whisperers that slumbered beneath the arching spires of Tizca’s rusted pyramids. Blue-hot engines grumbled and strained in their housings, keen to bear the gunship aloft.

The Thunderhawk had no wish to be here.

Nor did Ahriman, but what choice did he have?

His inability to halt Sobek’s flesh change weighed heavily upon him – less for the death of his Practicus, more that he had failed when the curse appeared to have been removed.

What had he done wrong? What could he have done differently?

No answers presented themselves, no matter how many times he relived the grim spectacle of Sobek reduced to inert dust. He had followed every clue within the *Book of Magnus,* applied every iota of what he had learned from the mutant bodies of those fallen prey to the curse.

There had to be something he had forgotten, some crucial factor he was overlooking. A tiny error introduced to his fundamental understanding that grossly affected the final outcome.

Whatever it was, it would have to wait.

The assault ramp lowered reluctantly, and hot, gritty winds blew inside. Ahriman tasted the lightning duelling in the gloaming twilight, the smell of burned metal and the dry taste of human ashes.

His chest tightened at the sight of ruined Tizca.

The rusted pyramids of the Fellowships lay like corpses in a storm-wracked wasteland of black dust, forlorn ruins haunted by the memory of their doom. Transposed from Tizca, their orientation and proximity to one another had

changed. Each had once occupied its own district, but here they gathered close, as if to lie side by side in death.

Towering over them all was the Pyramid of Photep.

Even in ruins it was magnificent.

Two kilometres in height, its bare steel structure was twisted and buckled by the violence of its transition from Prospero. Remarkably, a profusion of glass remained intact, glittering blades fused to the frame that reflected sick shimmers of trapped light.

Other buildings had come with the pyramids, but the ash buried them beneath moaning cinders, all of them obscured but for weathered stumps of jutting marble.

Ahriman pictured Tizca as it had been, his mind's eye conjuring a sunlit metropolis of polished stone and glass, a city of enlightenment and prosperity. Home to tens of thousands of educated, healthy and contented people. He recalled the food markets filling Occullum Square and the smells of roasted meats, produce fresh from the mountainsides, honeyed teas and a smorgasbord of hand-picked spices from Prospero's equatorial belt.

A flash flood of memories returned to him.

Sharing fresh-baked pastries with Lemuel at Voisanne's on the Street of a Thousand Lions.

Browsing the dusty shelves of an antiquarian bookseller on Zanoni Mews, each title a gateway to new understanding, each page offering the experience of a different universe.

Evening sunlight glinting from the ocean as he meditated in the great park of Fiorento.

Developing the latent powers of Tizca's citizenry, offering insights and developing mutual trust. Elevating others to see beyond their mundane senses.

All gone. Laid to waste by Fenrisian executioners.

'It appears we are not the only ones summoned,' said Menkaura, marching down the gunship's assault ramp to stand at his side.

The vision of lost Tizca faded, and Ahriman pushed aside the grief threatening to overwhelm him. He nodded and scanned the windswept ground between the pyramids, now seeing a host of Thunderhawks and Stormbirds scattered throughout the ruins.

'A veritable conclave,' said Ahriman. 'Do you know why we are here?'

'I do not,' said Menkaura with just enough of a pause to make Ahriman wary. 'But no good can come of returning to Tizca. Our Legion died here, but rather than leave the grief behind, we bear it like a millstone around our necks.'

The seer's armour gleamed like new and the wound dealt to him on the Torquetum had healed, but Ahriman sensed great melancholy upon him, a

resignation to a fate he dearly wished to avoid.

‘Then why are we here?’ asked Tolbek, fitting his helmet down onto his gorget. Hathor Maat and Sanakht came with him, the former’s aura bitter at their shared failure.

‘The Crimson King commands and we obey,’ replied Sanakht. ‘What other reason do we need?’

‘Spoken like a true believer,’ said Hathor Maat. ‘Do you ever tire of such slavish devotion?’

‘Do you ever tire of your childishness?’

‘What happened to your scarred fencing master?’ said Hathor Maat. ‘Have you learned all you can from him?’

‘Lucius is not my master,’ snapped Sanakht. ‘But perhaps I will tell him that you impugned his skill and watch as he cuts you to pieces.’

‘He could try,’ answered Hathor Maat.

‘Cease your bickering,’ warned Menkaura. ‘The spirits haunting these ruins feed on discord.’

‘Where do we go?’ asked Tolbek.

‘There,’ said Ahriman as a beacon of aether fire blazed in the gloom at the foot of the Pyramid of Photep. With great reluctance, he stepped from the Thunderhawk’s ramp, knowing he trod on the bones of dead brothers. The others followed him into the clouds of dark ash whipping around the pyramids.

Voices chattered on the wind, scratching at the edge of hearing – muttered curses, echoing cries, valedictions and sobbing laments.

Glass crunched underfoot, and scattered in the dust were reminders of that terrible day: broken shards of armour, dust-clogged weaponry, bent khopesh blades and wolf-paw talismans. Spiteful winds exposed cracked skulls from the dust. Balefire smouldered in empty eye sockets and mocking voices made sport in sagging jaws.

Ahriman kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, trudging through the knee-deep ash and billowing clouds towards the shimmering beacon. The ground trembled as towering shapes moved somewhere in the darkness with booming hammer-blow strides.

‘The god-engines are on the march,’ said Tolbek.

‘Preferably *away* from us,’ answered Ahriman.

‘On our left,’ said Sanakht.

Tolbek’s fists glittered with fire. ‘And the right.’

Ahriman’s grip tightened on his heqa staff as he saw the dust-hazed outlines of Legion warriors in their hundreds. The clouds of ash obscured them, but there was no mistaking the suspicion in their auras.

Then the ash lifted and removed all doubt.

Their fellow Thousand Sons came not in ordered ranks, but in sullen warbands of many sizes. They marched beneath unknown totems and sigil banners never seen on Prospero.

They marched towards a broken arch that once led within the Pyramid of Photep, beneath which Amon floated five metres above the cracked marble. The primarch's equerry was wreathed in fire, his body the beacon that had drawn this warrior host.

Nine Terminators of the Scarab Occult stood below him, the right lenses of their helms bisected with a vertical scar in honour of Magnus. Each bore a fire-bladed polearm and an opened book from which they recited complex *evocatus* of their own devising. Once, these warriors had been Ahriman's to command, but now they answered only to the primarch.

'How long since the Legion ever gathered in such numbers?' asked Hathor Maat.

'Not since Prospero,' said Ahriman, letting his perceptions range further afield as he tasted something *other* nearby, something hostile.

'This does not feel like a gathering of brothers,' said Tolbek, the fire wreathing his gauntlets burning hotter.

'Perceptive,' said Menkaura.

'Try not to sound *too* surprised.'

'He's right,' said Ahriman. 'This feels more like warring kings gathered under a banner of parley with their swords half drawn.'

The assembled Thousand Sons, three hundred at least, formed an arcing line before the broken arch, and the clash of belligerent auras set Ahriman's teeth on edge. The wind's moaning dropped as Amon raised his hands above his head.

'Brothers,' he said, his noble voice easily carrying over the muttering carried by the dust. 'It gladdens my heart to see so many of you heed this call. Know that only grave tidings would compel our gene-sire to summon you back to this terrible charnel house.'

Ahriman felt Amon's meaningless platitudes wash over him as something else tugged at his perceptions.

Something familiar and yet wholly alien.

'Where is Magnus?' shouted a warlord from the host and Ahriman looked away from Amon. The speaker was clad in intricately etched Terminator armour and stood at the head of a warband whose placement within the arcing line offered the most auspicious positioning should events turn hostile. Not only that, but the geometric arrangement of each of his warriors would considerably augment their aether powers.

Ignis, the self-anointed Master of Ruin.

'Well?' said Ignis, when Amon did not respond.

‘The Crimson King works tirelessly to save all that was lost when the Fenrisian savages put our great libraries to the torch,’ said Amon. ‘As he has done during every moment since we came to this cursed world.’

‘The summons came from the primarch,’ said a warrior named Memunim, his aura blunt and pugnacious. Though he bore the title of Seal Keeper of the Fifth House of Prospero, Ahriman knew him by his bellicose reputation only. ‘He should suffer this place as we do.’

Amon’s fire blazed brighter and Ahriman saw the equerry restrain his anger only with the greatest effort. The Scarab Occult lowered their blades, following the equerry’s lead.

‘Your master suffers like you cannot imagine, Memunim,’ said Amon. ‘Do you think he escaped Prospero unscathed? He did not. Leman Russ broke him. The Wolf King shattered his soul into splintered shards and every one of them is dying.’

A shock wave of horror passed through the Thousand Sons, as they read truth in Amon’s aura. Ahriman felt the ashes of Tizca respond, a tremor in the rock like the distant echo of a coming storm.

Amon ignored the many questions shouted up to him. Glowing cinders spun through the air, spiralling through the spars of ruined pyramids.

‘The Crimson King bleeds himself white as he restores Prospero’s legacy,’ he cried. ‘Every tale, every manuscript, every scroll – all the learning since first we put quill to parchment. His mind draws them from the warp and weft of the Great Ocean and imprints them on the crude matter of this material world.’

Amon burned brighter at every utterance, his grief spreading from warrior to warrior as they understood the enormity of what their primarch attempted and what it cost him. Again, the dust of Tizca’s dead stirred, enflamed by the potency of emotion building among the legionaries.

‘But the means by which he preserves that knowledge is flawed,’ continued Amon, oblivious or uncaring of the effect his words were having on his surroundings. ‘Everything he creates lessens him. The slivered shards of his soul burn brightly in remembrance of lore, but as their illumination fades, so too does he.’

Cries of denial rose from the assembled Thousand Sons, mixed with fresh anger at the warriors of Leman Russ. Somewhere, the howl of a wolf echoed through the ruins. Ahriman felt vast power stir in the dust, dark memories and darker horrors.

‘He knows this will destroy him,’ said Amon, drifting towards the restless dust and lowering his voice. ‘He knows it better than any of us, but what choice does he have? To remain trapped here for all eternity and allow all we once knew to

fade from memory? He will *not* let that happen. Our father seeks to restore our lost greatness, but to continue as he does will destroy him a piece at a time.'

Ahriman saw tears glisten on Amon's cheeks, the equerry's voice straining as he sought to convey the immense sacrifice their gene-sire willingly made for them all.

'We cannot let that happen,' said Amon, his hands clenching to fists. 'The Thousand Sons *must not* let that happen.'

'What must we do?' shouted a warrior Ahriman did not recognise – one of the Athanaeans by his emanations.

Ahriman looked back and at last saw the gleam in Amon's eye.

He recognised it for what it was: proffered hope.

Ahriman stepped forwards and raised his heqa staff.

'But he has a plan,' he said. 'Doesn't he?'

'He does, Chief Librarian,' said Amon, as the howling of wolves came again from all around. 'But it will require great sacrifice from his sons.'

'Just spit it out, Amon,' said Memunim.

'We must all lift the veil of grief,' said Amon as the Scarab Occult closed ranks around him. 'To make whole the Crimson King, we must relive the day Prospero burned.'

And the wolves of ash and fire roared from the dust.

SIX

Daemons in the dust
Shards
Dissipative systems

Ahriman pushed himself into the eighth enumeration as the graveyard of Tizca erupted. Beast packs of scabbed volcanic rock and molten blood exploded from below. Scorched monsters with an unslaked thirst for slaughter that bled toxic fumes.

A score of Thousand Sons legionaries were dragged down in the first moments of the attack. Blackened claws tore limbs from sockets and basalt fangs split battleplate with ease. Their screams were devoured by the wind and added to its hellish chorus.

Ahriman gagged on cinders heady with transhuman meat-stink.

Swirling ash made it impossible to see the creatures clearly. Some were powerful quadrupeds with hooked spines and tapered, lupine skulls. Others walked like men, but their eyes were reddened coals and embers smouldered between fangs of smoke. They were part beast, part man, and Ahriman saw a memory of Legion form in their transhuman bulk.

'What are they?' said Sanakht, both swords already drawn.

'The Wolves,' snarled Ahriman, facing down the ashen ghosts of those who had ended his world. 'Come to kill us again.'

Aether-bolts and gunshots criss-crossed the ruins of Tizca in torrents of fire. Psychic detonations blasted craters in the dust, and flocks of the glitter-skinned manta-creatures circled overhead like carrion feeders.

Ignis walked calmly through the carnage, following a precise path only he and his fellow Masters of Ruin could fathom. The sacred geometries cut into his armour and inked on the skin beneath were taut with the effort of reading this fight's variables. Its parameters changed swiftly, but, to him, predictably. Power threaded him, racing through his flesh as each new pattern formed before him.

Raptora warriors crushed ashen wolf-things with kine blows stronger than thunder hammers. Pavoni adepts froze the molten heat of the daemons' host forms.

With their strength waxing on the tides of the Great Ocean, the Pyrae were masters of this battlefield. They vaporised daemon wolves or suffocated the fires within them, leaving the fused statues for others to smash apart.

The Athanaeans were all but powerless here. These daemon wolves were avatars of hunger and death. What thoughts they had were brazen in their intent. Only the Corvidae fought with a modicum of art, even with their seersight blunted.

'All so untidy,' he whispered to himself, lifting his combi-bolter and blasting the head from a loping ash-wolf. It exploded in a welter of rock fragments and empyreal fire. He watched its remains spin away in perfect parabolas.

Ignis turned as a beast with a magma heart blazing within a cage of scorched ribs towered over him. He caught its clawed hand in his power fist as it swung at its head. He crushed the beast's limb and rammed the twin barrels of his combi-bolter between its blackened ribs.

Five shells carved a precise pattern through its body, breaking the daemon's power to hold its form. The beast crumbled instantly to dust and Ignis took three steps to the right. A vast spar of rusted adamantium slammed down where he had been standing, ten metres thick and half that again in width.

A blaze of warp lightning split the sky, and Ignis craned his neck as far his armour's gorget would allow. Continental-scale thunderheads, complete with soaring cliffs of cloud, depthless valleys and sheer escarpments bore down on the battle as every warband fought to reach the safety of their gunships.

Well, not every warband.

Ninety-three Legion warriors fell back beneath the archway of the Pyramid of Photep. Ahzek Ahriman's pitiful little cabal led them, fighting to reach Amon and the Scarab Occult. Others joined with Ahriman – Memunim's and Kiu's Raptora squads as well as that of young Nycteus.

'Ah, so this is how it begins,' mused Ignis.

Conjoined abominations of wolves and legionaries surrounded them. Flame-shot smoke geysered from the dust, daemons of dust given form by Tizca's endless nightmare. They howled with incinerating breath, Space Wolves in armour of ash bearing axes of fused obsidian.

'*Now* you wear your true faces,' sneered Ahriman, his staff weaving deadly patterns of evocatus. Vivid after-images scorched the air as he struck each monster down. The daemons aped the warriors of Fenris, but did not fight with anything approaching their cunning.

Sanakht gave battle at Ahriman's side, his swords cleaving ashen armour with every blow. Tolbek laughed as he fought, revelling in his heightened powers. Ash and dust these creatures might be, but Pyrae fire seared even ash to vapour. Menkaura and Hathor Maat fought back to back. An unlikely pairing, but effective.

Spars of light and shadow swayed across the shattered ruins within the Pyramid of Photep, dunes of rubble and steel, lakes of broken glass and scraps of burning

pages spinning in vortices of flame. Scattered bands of Thousand Sons legionaries fought beneath the pyramid's rusted spars in diminishing mandalas. Ahriman saw the warriors of Memunim and silent Kiu, Nycteus and Ignis.

Too few…

'We should not have entered the pyramid,' said Sanakht, his jackal sword aflame with killing light. 'We are cut off from the Thunderhawk.'

Ahriman swayed aside from a tearing strike that sparked from his pauldron. A fist of kine power shattered the crude wolf's head and the daemonic animus shrieked as it died. In the flames of its doom Ahriman tasted insight.

'The gunship is not our way out,' he said.

'No? Then what is?' demanded Hathor Maat, burn scars on his face already healing.

'*They* are,' said Ahriman.

Aether fire blazed from the bladed polearms of the Scarab Occult Terminators. With Amon at their head, they fought in a wedge towards a mound of heaped rubble directly beneath the great pyramid's apex.

The primarch's equerry bore his bladed staff in one hand, a fluted plasma pistol in the other. His every movement was balletic, every killing strike made in the sure and certain knowledge of its lethality.

'*Your* seersight is not so blunted,' whispered Ahriman.

'What are they doing?' said Hathor Maat, as the Terminators formed a defensive circle around Amon, like pagan warriors in a tribal shield-wall.

'No,' whispered Ahriman. 'Do not make us live this again.'

'What do you mean?' demanded Tolbek. 'Live what again?'

Before Ahriman could answer, a deafening roar split the air. Its power shook the upper reaches of the gutted pyramid, and the daemonic Space Wolves paused in their assault. As one they threw back their heads to loose an answering howl.

The arched entrance to the Pyramid of Photep exploded as a towering monster smashed its way inside. Taller than a Knight warrior of the Mechanicum, its body smoked as though fresh struck in a forge. Armour once frost-grey was now black as pitch and hung with skulls, lit from within by a molten heart.

A titanic Wolf King and murderous executioner.

Tizca's ghosts remembered Leman Russ all too well.

Though he and Magnus had planned for this, Amon's heart sank at the sight of the daemonic Wolf King. Standing atop the rubble at the geomantic heart of the pyramid, his flesh sang with the effort of reciting the dizzying formulae of invocatus Magnus had shown him.

Baying daemons of dust surrounded the beleaguered Thousand Sons, borrowing likenesses they did not comprehend. Amon hated them almost as much

as the warriors whose form they stole. They hurled themselves at the Scarab Occult, but the mandala was unbreakable – a ring of blades and aether fire.

Amon was not surprised to see Ahriman and his cabal fighting within the pyramid. The fate of the wayward Chief Librarian had always been entwined with that of the primarch.

The ashen Wolf King charged through the Thousand Sons, its blade of cinders and night sweeping before it in flaming arcs, the immaterium made solid. Battleplate was useless before it and no kine shield could resist its power.

Thousand Sons were smashed aside like children, no match for the daemon's monstrous form. It howled as it slew, aether powers dissipating against its blazing flanks. With every step it took, its smouldering face grew ever more bestial, losing all semblance of humanity.

'Rally to me, sons of Magnus!' shouted Amon, feeling the last locks of the invocatus snap open. Power flowed through his veins in a river of dark elixir, burning like phosphex yet colder than liqnite.

Amon slammed his heqa staff down on the altar of debris.

The ground exploded beneath him, and incandescent spears of light pierced his body. Amon screamed as unimaginable power filled him, the power of fire and pain.

And at its heart were eyes, the primarch's endless eyes.

He could not move; the light pinned him in place. He heard Magnus in his head, asking the question he had posed at their first meeting in the Rose City of the Nabataeans.

'*Will you die for me, my friend?*'

Amon gave the same answer he had given all those years ago.

'*Willingly.*'

For one last fleeting moment he was simply Amon. A warrior, a faithful son.

The next he was a vessel of the Crimson King.

Ahriman saw Amon burning in the fire of the Great Ocean, swelling, growing and bloating as unimaginable power filled him. The equerry's form was lost as another, mightier form was birthed like a new star.

It exploded into the air, angelic and terrible.

Deepest gold and vivid red, its beautiful face bore a single eye and a shock of wild hair.

'Magnus…' breathed Ahriman.

This was the primarch at his zenith, the Crimson King in all his glory. From a time when all the Imperium had venerated his exalted name and deeds.

An exemplar to humans and transhumans alike.

Light blazed from Magnus, and where it struck the daemon wolves, it burned them like images scorched from picter emulsion. From dust they had come, and

to dust they returned, howling in frustration and pain.

The burning effigy of Leman Russ saw its once and future nemesis, and the pyramid shook with its primal fury. Ahriman's body burned with remembrance of this battle, grief and guilt stabbing with blades sharper than any forged by Vulkan's sons. He felt the ice of the black rain, the horror of the wolves-that-were-not-wolves unleashed by Russ.

The avatars of Magnus and Russ threw themselves at one another – one a being of polluted ash and dust, the other an angel of illumination.

The seismic impact hurled every warrior to the ground and sent a thunderous shock wave through the ruined pyramid. Vast girders moaned as its structural lattice buckled all along its height. Metres-thick bolts and welded supports broke loose to fall in a lethal steel rain.

Ahriman rolled as a girder punched through the ground like a spear thrown by an angry god. He threw out a kine shield. Thunderous impacts flared. Falling steelwork ricocheted to either side. Repercussive agonies numbed his arm and sent arcing pain through his skull.

He looked up to see the pyramid's structure sway and bend, unbreakable beams snapping like kindling. Its collapse was now a certainty.

+We have to get out of here,+ cried Sanakht, his mind shouting the words as he channelled kine power through his blades to deflect falling debris.

+No,+ returned Ahriman over the deafening roar of splitting steel and the violence of the battling primarchs.

+The whole damn place is coming down!+ yelled Tolbek, the air above him hazed with plasmic heat that turned every piece of falling steel instantly to vapour.

+This is why we are here,+ said Ahriman, hating that *this* was the real reason the Thousand Sons had been summoned to Tizca. Not to hear Amon's grim pronouncement, but to bear witness to their greatest shame. To learn how to make their sire whole again.

The sword of Leman Russ clove Magnus' side and star-bright radiance blazed from the wound. In return, Magnus plunged his fist into Russ' chest. Volcanic heat bloomed and the Wolf King's bellow was one of abject torment.

They flew upwards, tens of metres, then hundreds.

Like beasts they tore at one another, entwined in swirling loops of burning dust and radiant veils of light. It became impossible to separate the combatants, individual forms lost in the hurricane of light and dark. Booming impacts and forking blasts of lightning sheared from the seething battle.

Ahriman pushed himself to his feet, aether power pulsing from his fingers. He resisted the urge to wield it, sensing how immeasurably dangerous that would be.

'All of you!' he shouted. 'The first enumeration only!'

Hathor Maat staggered over to him, the side of his face puckered and bleeding with fresh burn scars. Pink skin was already reforming over the wet redness.

'No,' said Ahriman. 'No powers. Not now.'

'You want me to *scar?*'

'I need you to live,' snapped Ahriman, his eyes focused on the battle raging half a kilometre overhead. 'The psychic pressure in here is immense, like fumes from a promethium well just waiting on a spark. Do you *really* want to be that spark?'

'Ahzek is correct,' said Ignis, marching through the dust without so much as a scratch on the hulking plates of his Terminator armour. 'Every signifier tells me it would be most unwise to employ raptures at this time.'

Ahriman looked beyond the psychic hurricane as the avatars of the primarchs fought to the death. Critical elements of the pyramid's steelwork were being drawn into their battle, twisting an already weakened structure to the point of imminent collapse.

'Ignis,' said Ahriman. 'What do you know?'

'Only that we cannot leave when the potentials within the numerological auspices are so uncertain,' said the Master of Ruin. 'The question is, what do *you* know?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Truly? You don't feel it?' said Ignis, genuinely surprised.

'Feel what?' demanded Ahriman. 'I have no time for your riddles, Ignis.'

'True, as the pyramid is going to collapse in precisely seventy-three point six seconds. But that is largely irrelevant,' said Ignis, pointing to Ahriman's belt with the barrel of his combi-bolter. 'I was referring to your recent acquisition.'

Ahriman looked down in disbelief.

Chained at his waist and sealed with golden locks was a tome heavy with lore and mighty with secret knowledge. Its cover was burgundy with a subtle crimson hue, the spine edged in worn copper and flaked gold.

'The *Book of Magnus,*' said Ahriman, pressing a hand to the soft leather of its bindings. He had last seen this volume when Magnus ordered he return it to the Obsidian Tower. Just being close to it imbued him with clarity of insight he had forgotten was possible.

The surviving Thousand Sons, bloody after the battle with the aether-wolves, gathered around him, line warriors and Scarab Occult both. With Amon gone, and Ahriman in possession of the primarch's grimoire, they looked to him for guidance.

'I know now why we are here,' he said.

'Why?' asked Hathor Maat.

Ahriman looked up as the base of the pyramid flooded with light. ‘Not to witness the death of Magnus, but what came after…’

The primarchs were falling like warring angels with no more strength to remain aloft. The fire and dust was gone, stripped from them by god-smiting blows and revealing the terrible hurts they had suffered.

Magnus bled light from a dozen mortal wounds, his radiance stained with the foreknowledge of his imminent demise. Yet the dark Russ fared little better, its substance split apart to reveal the sick core of daemonic energies boiling within.

The primarchs crashed to earth where Amon had brought forth the Crimson King from his own flesh. The impact shook the entire pyramid and raised a mushroom cloud of dust and debris. Ahriman felt the shock wave of their war batter his mind’s defences. Blood ran from his nose and ears.

The benighted Wolf King was the first to rise. All pretence at imitating Leman Russ was forsaken, for this was a broken thing of daemonic fury. It reached down and plucked Magnus from the ruins, blackened claws tearing the meat of Magnus’ neck as it raised him high.

Ahriman knew what must come next and raised a warning hand as the warriors of the Scarab Occult set their blades for a charge. He felt the build up of aether power in every warrior.

‘No!’ he cried. ‘This is not a second chance to save him!’

He threw his arms out and froze the link to the Great Ocean in every warrior. They fell to their knees, wailing in frustration at their new-found powerlessness. Ahriman roared as their aether-light filled him, and the *Book of Magnus* thrummed as it drank in the desperation of the Thousand Sons.

Ahriman’s eyes blazed, his seersight slamming through him and opening every one of his senses to the infinite scope of time. Innumerable histories yet to be written poured through him in a rush of incomprehensible imagery: legacies of betrayal and hope, eternities of war and suffering, the birth of all things and the ultimate doom of the universe.

The Russ thing hauled Magnus over its head. The Crimson King was helpless in its grip. The moment stretched, and as Ahriman looked deep into Magnus’ eye, he saw acceptance.

+*Find me. Restore me.*+

Russ slammed Magnus down across his knee.

When Ahriman had first seen Magnus die it had been a barely glimpsed horror, a pain that cut deep, but mercifully quickly.

Not so this time.

Magnus’ back bent further than even a primarch’s could survive. Ahriman saw rather than heard his father’s spine break, all natural elasticity suddenly absent as the two halves of his body folded in to one another.

Though he knew this was not truly his gene-sire, he still screamed with grief and anger. The body of the Crimson King shattered like a priceless statue cast down by unthinking savages. Blinding light blazed from its ruination.

The very heart of Magnus was revealed, a crystalline lattice of impossibly complex geometric arrangements – wheeling kaleidoscopes of unblinking eyes, churning wheels and spirals of power woven together so densely that they were all but indivisible.

The moment became Magnus' death and apotheosis in one.

His soul was broken into spinning shards of glass. Ahriman heard the Wolf King's thwarted howl as his quarry escaped, ignorantly unaware of just how mortal a blow he had struck.

Ahriman's mind followed the thousands of shards as they tumbled away from their centre of spiritual gravity. Following the alchymical truth of *like attracts like,* the vast majority remained bound to the will of the Crimson King and were reforged atop the Obsidian Tower.

But five hurtled far from their wellspring.

Ahriman watched them spin away from Magnus' broken form, carried beyond Prospero by dark design. He followed the shards until they vanished into the surging tides of the Great Ocean, imprinting the fleeting impressions they left in his mind.

The forgotten library of a wandering king, its shelves groaning under the weight of ten thousand tomes inscribed in the Phoinikōn grammata.

An inhuman gaol, aether-hostile and cold. A place unknown to him, but awash with pain and guilt. And a singular hatred.

A god amongst mountains, hungry for souls and once guarded by titanic angels.

A place of judgement and betrayal.

And lastly, a shining world at the heart of everything, once golden with great purpose, now fading as its dream died.

Even as Ahriman lost sight of the five shards, he sensed purpose in their scattering: deep resonances to be unravelled and meanings to divine.

+I will find you,+ he swore. +And I will restore you.+

No sooner had Ahriman made his vow than the stretched moment of Magnus' breaking ended. Sound and pressure roared over him as cascading steelwork and glass crashed down like artillery strikes. He blinked away the images of frozen soul-shards spinning through space and time.

A voice shouted in his mind.

+Ahzek! You need to go now!+

Who was speaking? His mind was sluggish, denied the swiftness of thought afforded within the Great Ocean.

+Ignis?+

+Indeed,+ said the Master of Ruin. +By my reckoning, you have thirty-six seconds before you are buried under many thousands of tonnes of steel.+

+Where are you?+

+Already outside,+ replied Ignis. +Where you must be in twenty-seven seconds if you plan on living.+

Ahriman nodded, still adjusting to the realignment of his senses. Both Russ and Magnus were gone, but the fury of their battle had destroyed what little structural integrity remained in the Pyramid of Photep.

The warriors who had followed him into the pyramid were already moving to safety. Menkaura led them, using his limited seersight to plot a course through the tumbling debris. Sanakht carried a wounded warrior, and Ahriman was never more thankful the swordsman had sworn an oath of loyalty to him.

Ignis was already beyond, and Memunim, Kiu and Nycteus forged a route from the pyramid, faltering kine shields keeping the worst of the barrage at bay.

Only the Scarab Occult remained at Ahriman's side and it took Ahriman a moment to understand why.

'Amon,' he said, seeing the broken body of the primarch's equerry lying atop the heaped rubble at the pyramid's centre.

'Go,' he ordered the Terminators, but not a single warrior stepped away. Together they crashed through the falling rubble towards Amon, knowing they could not possibly escape before the pyramid collapsed. Every warrior of the Scarab Occult had attained the rank of Philosophus and but for their kine powers, Ahriman knew he would be dead already.

He scrambled up a slope of vitrified stone and dust. Amon's body lay at a sickeningly unnatural angle, his back clearly broken. The price he had paid for hosting the primarch's echo.

'You damn fool,' he said, knowing he would have done the same had the task been given to him. He lifted Amon from the rubble, and fused plates of broken armour crumbled from his body. Ahriman heard splintered spinal bones grate beneath the equerry's battered, putty-like flesh.

Amon grunted in agony, his eyelids flickering.

The roar of falling steelwork surged in volume.

Ahriman looked up in time to see the remains of the Pyramid of Photep's upper reaches crashing down in a tsunami of steel. The Scarab Occult formed a circle around Ahriman and Amon, but there could be no escape and no survival.

'*You* are the damn fool,' groaned Amon. 'You always were.'

Ahriman closed his eyes and bellowed in frustration.

But death did not come.

He lifted his head to see a ceiling of shivering steel hovering a metre above him in defiance of this world's arbitrary gravity.

'How are we still alive?' said Ahriman.

He looked to the Terminators, but not even the Scarab Occult possessed artes potent enough to save them. Their auras showed as much surprise as his.

'Amon? Is this you?' he asked.

Amon shook his head, his teeth grinding in pain.

'This is not Amon's doing,' said a melodic voice that echoed inside Ahriman's skull, as though twins spoke as one. ***'It is mine.'***

Ahriman turned to see one of the yokai automata standing with its slender arms upraised. Every portion of its sculpted body was etched in spiralling symbols of invocatus and *diabolus,* like an *uhi*-cut tribesman bearing his *tā moko* markings.

'No,' he said. 'We purged the Tartaruchi's automata of their inhabiting warp entities.'

'You did indeed,' replied the yokai. ***'This body is new and cold, but it is very suited to me.'***

'I will destroy you,' promised Ahriman, pushing his mind into the aggressive enumerations. 'Whatever you are.'

The yokai took a step back, still with its arms raised.

'You would go against your primarch's will?'

'What do you mean?' demanded Ahriman as a terrible suspicion began to form. 'What are you?'

The yokai chuckled. ***'You don't recognise me, Ahzek? I'm hurt, and more than a little disappointed.'***

'You are the Iron Oculus,' said Ahriman, horrified the Torquetum's seer was free of its sarcophagus prison.

'I am Aforgomon,' said the yokai. ***'Gifted with a new form and blessed with new purpose.'***

'What purpose do you think you have?'

'The same as yours, Ahzek,' said the daemon. ***'I intend to save Magnus the Red.'***

Amon watched the *Khemet* rise into the storm from the apex of his pyramid. He watched until the clouds swallowed the starship, then willed the floating support throne back inside his workshop.

The golden structure of his mechanical prison was perfectly shaped to his broken body, and a psychic hood rising over the back of his skull allowed him control of its every function.

Amon's back was destroyed.

The dust daemon of the Wolf King had shattered his bones like glass from the cervical vertebrae to the lumbar. But for the galaxy having been turned on its axis

by treachery, Amon knew he would now be dead or interred within a Dreadnought sarcophagus.

Magnus awaited him, studying a diagram of planetary motion overlaid with the best tidal predictions the Corvidae could manage. He looked up as Amon entered, his face creased in the thin smile of one who bears the guilt for another's suffering.

'Are you in pain, my son?' asked Magnus.

'My spine is in fragments,' pointed out Amon. 'I cannot feel anything at all below the neck.'

'I wasn't referring to bodily pain,' said Magnus with genuine remorse. 'When you bore my spirit, you felt what I felt when Russ broke me. You felt my loss, my guilt. You felt… *everything.*'

'And I would do it again in a heartbeat, my lord.'

Magnus nodded. 'I know you would. Which is why you will always be my most loyal son, Amon. But the agonies of the flesh will return. Are you prepared for that?'

'I am, but Hathor Maat has assured me his Pavoni adepts can keep the worst of it at bay while they resculpt my bones.'

'Hathor Maat has left with Ahzek and his cabal.'

Amon tried to nod, then remembered he could not.

'Yes,' he said. 'They are all gone.'

'The tides are auspicious,' said Magnus, tapping the chart before him. 'It bodes well for their quest.'

'I should be with them.'

'No,' said Magnus, 'I need you here. We have a great deal of work before us.'

'What help can I be, my lord?' asked Amon, manoeuvring his throne to a position before a workbench strewn with cracked lens glass, pewter frames and piles of sanding cloths. 'My body is crippled and what power I have left recedes with the tides of the Great Ocean.'

'It vexes you that your Fellowship declines,' said Magnus. 'But it will rise again. Sooner than you know.'

'When?'

Magnus did not answer and moved to another table, upon which sat the delicate mechanism of an *antikythera,* a combination of divinatory telescope, armillary sphere and immaterial barometer.

'My brother once crafted me such a device,' said Magnus, turning the screw attached to the central plates to move the lenses and align the aether-sights. 'Crafted on a world that weathered Old Night, but was lost to the same madness nonetheless.'

‘I remember you telling me of the piece,’ said Amon. ‘A beautiful artefact. Exquisite. Unique, even. And now lost forever.’

‘Lost? Yes, I suppose that’s one way of putting it,’ said Magnus, turning the screw again to increase the tension in the concealed springs within the device.

‘I was remaking it for you, but it did not survive the journey to this place,’ said Amon. ‘The lenses are distorted now and the plates are misaligned. You won’t see anything.’

‘You don’t know what I’m looking for.’

Magnus peered down the lenses and unlatched the pin securing the Antikythera’s moving parts. The springs released their pent-up energy, and the allegorical aspects of the celestial vault engraved on the bronze plates spun freely.

‘Tell me, Amon, do you understand what is meant in mechanics by a dissipative system?’

‘No, my lord, I was never meant for a life in the forge.’

Magnus grinned, keeping his eye to the viewing lens.

‘Indeed. Well, a Techmarine would tell you that a dissipative system is one that loses energy to friction. He would also tell you that most of these systems suffer loss gradually in a manner that is entirely predictable. But there are other dissipative systems that do not follow this pattern. They are chaotic and untidy. For a while they lose energy steadily, then suddenly, only to then regain their predictable rate of loss without apparent rhyme or reason.’

‘I’m not sure I understand your meaning here, my lord.’

‘If you consider life as a chaotic dissipative system, you will understand what I mean,’ said Magnus. ‘Can you guess the most dissipative system anyone has ever or will ever encounter?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘It is war, Amon,’ said Magnus. ‘War is violently uneven and wholly unpredictable. Its course can rarely be divined, even by the greatest seers, and even they will oft times be taken completely unawares. As we now know to our cost.’

Magnus placed the Antikythera back on the bench, apparently satisfied by what he had seen.

‘The conflict between Horus and the Emperor is war on a scale not known since the earliest epochs of the galaxy. It is the greatest chaotic dissipative system I have ever seen.’

‘Why are you telling me this, my lord?’

‘Because I cannot see how it will end,’ said Magnus. ‘And what cannot be avoided must be welcomed.’

The Thousand Sons face the ghostly warp-echoes of their past

PART TWO
THE BARQUE OF RA

SEVEN

Zhivago
Seer hunter
Men of ice

‘This is the one?’ asked Dio Promus.

‘Yes, assuming Uexküll’s last exload is correct,’ said Magos Videns, scrolling through the *Zhivago*’s manifest on his dataslate and checking it against the alphanumerics stencilled on the bulkhead. ‘Deck sixteen-nine alpha, Medicae Astartes. Triage station twelve hundred?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then this should be Varaestus Sarilo.’

‘What’s his electoo serial code?’

‘Nineteen, corvus-lambda, twenty-seven, sixth of the tenth, fifty-first, one-zero-two-three-five.’

Promus nodded and inspected the candidate critically.

The unconscious legionary lay on a steel gurney in a portion of the *Zhivago* set aside for Legiones Astartes casualties en route to Terra. Too badly hurt for field Apothecaries to repair, not damaged enough for a Dreadnought frame.

And far too valuable to be left to die.

Sixty-four other legionaries shared this vaulted space, some freshly dead, most with wounds so awful they existed in that liminal space where life and death were indistinguishable.

Varaestus Sarilo was naked but for a grubby sheet draped across his midriff. His wounds were many and deep, and all to the fore. Sweat beaded his taut skin as transhuman biology worked unknowable miracles within to knit broken bones, renew ruptured organs and weave flesh.

A swept-winged raptor tattooed across Sarilo’s ribless torso told Promus he was Raven Guard. Even without the tattoos, skin pallor revealed his heritage.

‘No matter how many alien suns they see, the sons of Corax never darken,’ said Promus. ‘I wonder, flaw or birthright?’

‘A legacy of their sire,’ said Videns.

‘Indeed,’ said Promus, pressing his fingertips to the carved ivory of Sarilo’s bicep. ‘Yet another reason to be thankful that Lord Guilliman’s blood flows in my veins.’

He let a fraction of psy-power bleed from his mind, sending a bioelectric pulse through the warrior's skin. The muscle rippled as invisible etchings formed temporary ridges of scar tissue, revealing the sub-dermal electoo.

'Nineteen, corvus-lambda, twenty-seven, sixth of the tenth, fifty-first, one-zero-two-three-five,' confirmed Promus.

'I could have used haptics to confirm that,' said Videns. 'I know how you dislike–'

'No,' said Promus. 'If I cannot bear the touch of a brother legionary's skin, how will I endure a connection to his mind?'

'As you wish,' said Videns with a curt bow.

The subdued light of the medicae deck reflected from the Statisticator's chromed cog-mask. Two vertical slits of an augmitter served as a mouthpiece, and instead of eyes, a rotating selector held a collection of brass-framed loupes. A floor-length robe hung on Videns in a way that suggested his bodyplan owed nothing to conventional anatomy.

Promus set aside his skull-topped staff and reached up to unsnap his helmet seals. The smell of the infirmary ship assailed him immediately: a toxic melange of stagnant blood, rotting flesh, soiled bindings, mud from a dozen worlds, counterseptic and sweat.

But the smells would not be the worst of it.

Not by a long way.

'Step back, Videns,' said Promus.

The magos did as instructed, knowing to keep his distance from the Librarian at moments like these.

Promus removed his helm and his vision greyed as the armour relinquished its input to his mortal senses. The shimmering crystalline matrix of the psychic hood worked into the rear curve of his burnished grey plate dimmed.

Pain rammed into his mind.

Hard, straight up the spine.

It stabbed his joints with hot nails, filled his lungs with blood-frothed matter. It splintered his bones to powder and stabbing glass. It split the meat of his limbs as earth opens before a ploughshare and ran molten from his body like heated wax. It crackled on flash-burned skin and rotted him from the inside with gangrenous corruption.

Phantom sensation and psychic echoes, but no less traumatic.

Just under seven thousand wounded souls were listed on the infirmary ship's manifest, and Promus felt every scrap of their pain. He willingly took it all.

His mind screamed with it, a sparking circuit board that ran the gamut of suffering from purely physical pain to the anguish of limbs lost, senses ripped away and hideous deformity carved in storms of hot shrapnel.

Promus rammed a fist into the bulkhead, crumpling the inches-thick steel. His eyes locked wide. His teeth ground against one another like tectonic plates crafting mountain ranges. Engorged veins and straining sinews swelled and stood proud on his neck.

He could dissipate the pain into his hood, free himself from the suffering of those around him, but he did not. Pain was a gift, and to feel it was to nurture it, to gird his humanity to the awful necessity of the burden he bore. A blood price he paid willingly.

Promus exhaled and unclenched his fists. The pain was still there, but it was part of him now. Manageable.

Better, it gave him a way in.

'Librarian?' said Videns.

Promus nodded and let out a shuddering breath.

'Tell me,' he said.

Videns consulted his slate.

'Cognitive diagnostics suggest a high probability of psychological suitability, though Legionary Sarilo's records are far from complete.'

'Only to be expected,' said Promus. 'The Nineteenth do not easily submit to such evaluations. His last?'

'The last verified evaluation was five standard years before the Isstvan infamy.'

'Your analysis?'

'My initial statistical prognostication still stands,' said Videns. 'Legionary Sarilo's latent psychic traits and genetic markers suggest minimal imagination, a propensity for dogmatic thought, and an almost slavish devotion to duty.'

'There is nothing slavish about the Nineteenth.'

'A mere turn of phrase, but his genetic predispositions say otherwise.'

'Genetics do not tell of a life,' said Promus. 'Only by his deeds can a warrior be damned or proven.'

'Be that as it may, I am confident Legionary Sarilo will be a worthy candidate for the Sigillite's programme,' said Videns.

Promus drew on the power within him, power he had once used with pride as Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines Legion, but which now marked him as dangerous. He placed his hands either side of Sarilo's head and the warrior moaned, his mind already sensing the presence of an intruder.

Past experience told Promus a Space Marine's mind was a steel-toothed trap. Subtlety was pointless.

He let out a breath and rammed his consciousness into Sarilo's mind, a clawing trawl of his warrior soul.

And a bloody tide of memory and experience roared over him.

Wars waged and enemies slain.

Brothers lost and honour tarnished.

The world of black sands. Isstvan V.

A name of cursed provenance, a new byword for treachery.

Raining blood. Fire and steel screaming from the sky. A shout of betrayal from ten thousand guns. Trusted friends now bitter foes. Pain and torment, a father fallen.

Lost or dead? Who could say?

Pain warred with loss. A thirst for vengeance. The massacre of the Urgall Depression overshadowed all else, the desperate flight. Days of hopelessness. Days trapped on a world where everything sought his death. Nights of being hunted by clicking horrors from the shadows that knew the dark better than he ever would.

Then ships out of the void, deliverance from afar.

Hope the fight was not lost. Then despair as hope burned.

Shattered Legions fighting to their last breath.

No hope save death in battle. Vengeance. Always vengeance.

Vengeance! Vengeance! Vengeance!

The raw purity of it. Striking and killing, bathing in the blood of those who had betrayed the Emperor. A hunger that could never be sated, a thirst that could never be quenched.

Vengeance!

Promus withdrew from Varaestus Sarilo's mind.

His hands felt burned. He snatched them back, fingers spread wide. Violent urges were a roaring storm in his skull. He threw back his head and howled, a primal shout as potent as any loosed by the Rout.

His hood blazed, the psy-matrix burning phosphor-bright as it dissipated the psychic aftershocks of his mental union with Varaestus Sarilo. Promus' heart thundered in his chest. He willed its jackhammer rhythm to slow, expelling the rushing tide of aggression in sweat and shuddering breaths.

His vision bled crimson, his breath hot with fury.

The urge to kill drained by degrees.

Promus shook his head.

'You were wrong,' he said.

'*Wrong?*' said Magos Videns. 'Every aspect of statistical probability suggested Varaestus Sarilo was perfect.'

'Perhaps he was,' said Promus. 'But Isstvan broke him. He is damaged, consumed by a need for revenge.'

'Few of your kind are not,' pointed out Videns.

'My vengeance will be had when Horus lies dead at the Emperor's feet,' said Promus. 'I do not reckon it simply by the tally of foes reaped. Sarilo's thirst for

vengeance is a temptation, and temptation is weakness.'

'A small weakness, surely?'

Promus shook his head. 'A warrior's worth can be measured greater or lesser, but no weakness can be counted small. Not now, not with so much at stake. The Chosen of Titan must be beyond temptations. *All* temptations.'

Videns stowed his slate within the folds of his robes and bowed to Promus.

'Apologies, Librarian Promus,' he said. 'I had high hopes for this incursion, but it seems I was wrong.'

Promus spun and hauled Videns from the deck, residual pain fuelling his anger at the Statisticator's error.

'Do you understand what your being wrong has cost? Do you? Think of all this warrior could have done, every traitor he might yet have killed? Do you truly *understand?*'

Videns struggled in the Librarian's grip, his inhuman anatomy squirming beneath his robes. A bark of fear squalled from his augmitter.

'Librarian Promus, please! Statistical prognostication, for all its empirical clarity, is not perfect.'

'Your previous assertions speak to the contrary,' said Promus, tightening his grip. 'Numbers do not lie when you are proven correct, but are conveniently imperfect when you err.'

'No method of prognostication is without its flaws,' said Videns in a rush. 'Prophecy, augurs, haruspicy, cartomancy, *all* are subject to interpretation and variations!'

Promus had not the stomach for Videns' excuses and increased the pressure on the half-man's neck still further. Metal deformed with a groan of plasteel and the hiss of straining pneumatics. The brass loupes on the tech-priest's faceplate spun frantically.

'Librarian!' cried Videns. 'He wakes!'

Promus dropped the magos to the deck, knowing the anger he felt was misplaced and not entirely his own. He saw his own face reflected in the brushed steel of Viden's mask and turned away in disgust.

Varaestus Sarilo was stirring, his eyelids fluttering as the violation of his memories overcame the biological mechanisms keeping him sedated. He groaned, fists bunching as combat-glands doused his muscles in stimms.

Promus laid a hand on Sarilo's skull, almost tenderly.

'Forgive me, brother,' he said.

Then vaporised the legionary's brain with thoughts of fire.

They left the chambers of the Medicae Astartes. Promus sealed the doors behind him with profound regret. The shadowed hall beyond was dark and silent, no longer a place of healing, but a sepulchre.

‘Damn you, Malcador…’ he whispered, placing his hand on the door’s cold metal.

His eyes fell upon the dull silver of his arm. The curve of his vambrace was gunmetal grey, no longer the cobalt-blue of the XIII. The removal of his Legion colours had been traumatic, but at times like this he was glad of their absence. His brothers in Ultramar would never countenance the cold logic of Malcador’s plan.

They would see what was done here as a gross betrayal, but they did not know what he knew. They had not seen what he had. They had not listened to Magnus the Red’s grandiloquence as he stood in the arena of Nikaea and refuted the accusations of sorcery laid against him.

Promus remembered that day all too well.

Volcanic heat, reflections in vitrified glass labyrinths.

Righteousness swelling within his breast as he stood shoulder to shoulder with his fellow warrior-mystics.

Elikas, Umojen, Zharost, Chief Librarians all.

And Targutai Yesugei, foremost Stormseer of the White Scars.

The Chogorian had spoken with the wisdom of Ptolemy, and the odd syntax of his savagely accented Gothic belied the insight of his words. Each Librarian had added to Yesugei’s oration, building an argument founded on logic, reason and evidence.

But they had been deceived.

Even Yesugei, wisest amongst them, had not seen what Magnus concealed behind his mask of good intent.

Promus’ gauntlet clenched into a fist.

‘You lied to us,’ he whispered through gritted teeth.

The master of the *Arethusa,* Magos Umwelt Uexküll, met them in the stained-glass narthex of the medicae decks. He watched the spindle-limbed Vorax automata prowling the *Zhivago’*s infirmary vaults, his steel-dust body draped in the shadow of a statue representing a wounded soldier and the Emperor.

More accurately, Uexküll’s cybernetic proxy awaited them.

Wrought from modified Lorica Thallax exo-armour and Kastelan parts, this Ursarax was a mechanised shock trooper of pneumatic limbs and fibre-bundle muscles. No mere robot, its augmented combat-chassis was normally hardwired to the excised cerebrum and nervous system of an indentured tech-thrall.

The high magos himself remained aboard the *Arethusa,* an atrophied revenant of neurodegenerative maladies entombed within a mobile gibbet-harness. In lieu of physical presence, Uexküll projected his consciousness into the hulking Ursarax’s war-body through the mystic artes of cybertheurgy.

The orange-lacquered Ursarax looked up as Promus and Videns approached, soft light from the electro-flambeaux dancing across its metallic body. Painted

serpents writhed across the gleaming, piston-driven armour, and someone had painted a crimson skull across its faceplate. Mind impulse cables ran in cornrows across the elongated crown, linking Uexküll's sensorium to the brutalised cortex within.

Promus hated Uexküll's proxy. The constant agony of the living being enslaved within left a raw, bloody taste in his mouth, as though he were chewing glass splinters.

'Where is the candidate?' asked Uexküll, his voice a patchwork assembly of previous vox-samples that were all that remained of his once stentorian tones.

'He was not suitable.'

'Regrettable,' said Uexküll. 'Disposal protocols apply. Vorax contingents have the crew quarantined in the lower decks ready for termination, and I have exloaded instructions for a random warp jump to the *Zhivago'*s logic engines.'

The anger that almost ended Videns surged through Promus, but his psychic hood swiftly dissipated the sensation. On a ship of wounded souls, where suffering and misery abounded, strong emotions were blood in the water to the *things* beyond the veil.

He took a breath and turned from the proxy. 'Do what you must – I am done here.'

'Not so,' said Uexküll. 'A ship draws near.'

The stitched-together syllables made it hard to lift any nuance from Uexküll's voice, but Promus immediately sensed his displeasure that this ship was in such close proximity.

'How did it get so close without us detecting it?'

'Because it is the *Doramaar,'* said Uexküll. 'Rumour has it that a warrior of the Nineteenth has its helm.'

Promus cursed silently.

'Nagasena is here,' he said.

The hazed curve of the Planet of the Sorcerers slid from the oculus bay as the *Khemet* turned its prow away. Ahriman watched it diminish with curious sadness.

'I hate the world you brought us to,' he said under his breath, 'but each time I leave, I fear I might never return.'

The *Khemet'*s command bridge tapered to the elliptical oculus, with heavy beams of Prosperine serpentwood following the golden ratio as they arched over flagstones of dark slate. Polished granite busts of previous shipmasters rested in crystalline sepulchres, their haughty gaze ensuring each successor was worthy of commanding so fine a vessel.

Legion warriors and bronze-armoured thralls stood before marble obelisks cut with glyphic formulae and set with glowing dataslates. Each thrall boasted an

empty eye socket, a self-inflicted devotion where a shard of Tizcan glass had gouged away the orb in imitation of the Crimson King.

At the heart of the bridge was the *Khemet*'s scrying pool, sunk in a tiled shaft before the oculus bay. Menkaura and Sanakht stood whispering at its edge, looking down to where a conjoined ring of shaven-headed neophytes encircled the pool.

These were the Envisioned, elevated thralls who read the tides of the Great Ocean echoing within the restless waters of the pool to guide the vessel. Pavoni artes had rendered their faces eyeless and fused the bones of their hands together in an unbroken séance circle.

'Do we have a vector?' asked Ahriman.

'We have a heading to take us out of the Eye,' said Menkaura, without turning from his study of the pool. 'But neither I nor the Envisioned see a specific destination. It is most vexing.'

Ahriman nodded and returned to the shipmaster's throne, where the *Book of Magnus* lay chained upon the command lectern.

He placed a hand upon his primarch's grimoire, feeling the immense power within. Beyond the power, he felt the yearning for wholeness, a yearning inextricably linked to the mortal whose hand had written it.

'Mahavastu Kallimakus,' he whispered. 'Is that who we will find on this first road?'

'Ahzek?' said Menkaura.

Ahriman looked up. 'A heading is all we need for now,' he said. 'What I saw in the Pyramid of Photep will guide our steps towards the first of our sire's soul-shards.'

Already Ahriman felt the thrumming tension in the *Khemet*'s superstructure, a guided flow of aether energy borne from prow to stern by crystals grown in the Reflecting Caves and Athanaean raptures inscribed in every bulkhead.

'Your ship feels it too,' said Aforgomon, emerging from the shadows at the rear of the command bridge. The daemon's yokai body stood behind Ahriman's throne. ***'The potential of this moment fills its steel bones. It strains to be under way.'***

The presence of the bound daemon was a dull ache in Ahriman's soul, one he had unsuccessfully tried to ignore. His first instinct had been to break the invocatus bindings on the yokai's skull and cast the daemon out, but Magnus' will in this matter was clear.

'Your hate for me is palpable,' said Aforgomon, ***'but you know you will fail without me. Can the same be said for the others in this ragged host you have assembled? Fulgrim's treacherous bladesman, fellow warbands whose only connection is that they witnessed their father fall a second time, and a pair of***

insane god-engines. Not to mention the beasts and renegades. If this rabble is what Magnus believes will save him, then the Lords of Ruin chose wisely when they made Horus Lupercal their champion.'

'Do not speak his name,' said Ahriman. 'You don't get to say the Crimson King's name in my presence.'

'And what of the others you will betray?' said Aforgomon in a playful whisper. ***'What of Memunim and Kiu, Menkaura, Sanakht and Hathor Maat? Do I get to say their names?'***

'What are you talking about? They are my brothers. I would never betray them.'

'Now ***they are your brothers,'*** agreed the daemon. ***'But who can say what they will be to you in a few months time? Or a year? What will they be to you in ten years? Or even ten thousand years? Surely you are not arrogant enough to imagine you will enjoy the primarch's favour forever? You must know others vie for your exalted position.'***

Aforgomon moved around the throne and took a seat next to Ahriman, upon the stone bench reserved for the *Khemet*'s first officer, traditionally an adept of the Athanaeans.

'Do you recall Shrike?' asked Aforgomon.

The abrupt change of tack surprised Ahriman.

'You mean Heliosa?'

The daemon waved a dismissive hand. Ahriman noted the paint peeling back on its digits, the corruption of the thing within manifesting without. ***'An insipid name when a far bloodier one suits what happened there so much better. But, yes,*** **Heliosa.** ***Where Magnus and Leman Russ almost came to blows before the Great Library.'***

'Of course I remember that world. What of it?'

'It was a planet rich in unique flora and fauna,' said Aforgomon. ***'Or at least it was before the Word Bearers fleet bombed it to dust a year after you left.'***

That caught Ahriman's attention.

'Lorgar destroyed Heliosa?'

'Yes, didn't you know?'

'No.'

Aforgomon shrugged, as if the destruction of an entire planet was a matter of little consequence. ***'Then this may interest you. Among the planet's many – now extinct – species was a particularly vicious breed of raptor that nested in clifftop eyries on Phoenix Crag's northern coastline. A mother raptor produced three chicks from every clutch of eggs. No more, no less, and she would watch her newborns to see which chick emerged the strongest. After a few days, one would turn on its siblings, trying to push them out of the nest. The weaker***

chicks fought back, of course, but in the end they were defeated and fell from the nest to die.'

'The mother let one of her offspring murder the others?'

Aforgomon nodded. ***'She would coolly observe this life-or-death struggle, but she would never intervene, waiting to see which of her offspring was most worthy to fly at her side.'***

Ahriman smiled at the transparency of the daemon's gambit.

'Magnus may have given you a new body,' said Ahriman, 'but this attempt to sow discord is farcical.'

'The minutia of mortal interactions are yet new to me,' laughed the unapologetic daemon, the sound hideously *vital* for something mechanical, something the very antithesis of life. ***'It is the curse of all things to be true to their nature.'***

'Your lies will not work on me,' said Ahriman.

The daemon traced the lines cut into its mechanised body, as though contemplating what falsehood to attempt next.

'You should know that my essence is a much-feared aspect of the Pantheon, what the neverborn seers call **fatewoven** ***– pure unpredictability and chaos. All ages of great change are chains of fatewoven moments, instants where the smallest decision will have enormous consequences. A thing expected to be negative will actually be positive, something assumed constant is revealed to be finite, what mortals believe to be eternal suddenly vanishes. Even you must see that this is an age of fatewoven times like no other.'***

The daemon leaned towards Ahriman, close enough for him to smell the sour reek of the magicks binding it and see the perfect patterning of the grooves cut in its ceramic body.

'My essence of chaos is the bane of seers,' said Aforgomon, ***'so the only sane response to fatewoven moments is to embrace them and allow them to mould you anew. Then, what at first may seem disastrous and perverse becomes wondrous.'***

'I have not the stomach for any more of your lies.'

Though it had no face, the daemon radiated disappointment, as though Ahriman had failed to grasp some fundamental truth.

'Very well,' it said, rising from the bench. ***'But consider all the fatewoven moments in your own life and think on where and when you might have embraced them to know miracles.'***

'There is a flaw in your reasoning,' said Ahriman. 'Your talk of embracing these changes only works with the benefit of hindsight. I suspect they would not be so easy to recognise in moments of crisis.'

'We shall see,' said the daemon. ***'You think I seek to betray you? Perhaps I do, but you should know I am not the only scorpion on your back.'***

Ahriman turned from the daemon.

'Get off my damn bridge,' he said.

Jambik Sosruko placed four delicate cups on the table, two on either side of a painted ceramic pot. Tales of heroes were rendered in hair-fine strokes of pale blue oxide around the pot's circumference, and such was the artist's skill that their rise and fall could be followed in endlessly repeating cycles.

Yasu Nagasena let his eyes follow the epic scenes painted on the pot, struggling to conceal his surprise at the master of the *Arethusa*'s shocking appearance. The Sigillite had, of course, informed him of Magos Uexküll's affliction, but to see what it had done to him in the flesh was something else entirely.

The shipmaster's body was an immobile revenant of mummified flesh, but Nagasena remembered him entirely differently. Four years had passed since he had last seen Uexküll, four years in which degenerating motor neurons had unravelled autonomous control of his body.

A full-body gibbet-harness enclosed his useless limbs, and a network of electro-stimulation cables, mechanised lungs and gurgling intravenous tubes sustained his atrophied physique. A humming MIU implant replaced the entire rear half of his skull and afforded him locomotive control of the harness, but nothing close to the smooth ease he had once known. Uexküll's face was fixed and expressionless, but his eyes, still organic after all he had endured, remained alive with fierce intelligence.

'Greetings, Yasu,' said Uexküll, his synthetic voice also a ghost of its former glory. 'I have one rule. Do not pity me. My body is much changed, true, but I am still me. I would consider it a grave insult were you to view or treat me otherwise.'

'As you wish,' said Nagasena, turning his attention to Dio Promus – unarmoured, but entirely formidable in a bodyglove and slate-grey chiton. His flinty gaze was unwavering, but Nagasena felt no intimidation. They had crossed paths twice before, and though neither had been in any hurry for a third encounter, Malcador cared nothing for their reservations.

Promus did not speak, his attention focused on Nagasena's three companions.

The first was a legionary with alabaster skin marred by childhood brand marks and a shadow of black hair. His name was Antaka Cyvaan and he had once been a Librarian of the Raven Guard. Now he wore the bare brushed steel of a knight without a Legion. The equal of Promus in scale, Cyvaan somehow managed to appear slender in comparison to the former Ultramarine.

Nagasena's eyes narrowed as he saw Promus would not return Cyvaan's gaze. Promus sensed the scrutiny, and his eyes filled with ice.

The second and third of Nagasena's companions came as a pair, though for all they were apart they might as well be counted as a single being.

Lady Veleda was a congenital dwarf with wrinkled, nut-brown skin and the open features of the Indoi Kush. No one knew her true age, but she claimed to have witnessed the Lightning Bearer raise the Eagle at the Declaration of Unity, and Nagasena believed her. She sat to his left, short fingers tapping an irregular tattoo on the polished surface of the table as if to music only she could hear.

Lastly, Jambik Sosruko was Lady Veleda's protector, an ochre-skinned giant clad in furs and twisted iron rings. A gene-stock *migou* from Nei Monggol, his dexterity and cognitive capacity had been augmented with a bulky synaptic crown, making him the very image of a savage king from ancient days.

The staterooms of the *Arethusa* were spacious, but two Space Marines and an ogre made it small. The walls and ceiling were polished marble and chromed steel, shimmering with hololithic representations of industrial schematics. A gleaming ouslite table of veined black ran the length of the room like a toppled monolith.

A cold space, but a functional one. A Mechanicum one.

An escort of gold-armoured Thallaxi had met Nagasena and his retinue in one of the upper embarkation decks. The vaulted, industrial space was noisy and dense with groaning lifter rigs and maniples of battle-automata, standing like the entombed statues of the First Thearch of the Dragon Lands.

The Thallaxi led them through a series of enamelled corridors stencilled in *Lingua-technis* to the upper staterooms where the masters of the *Arethusa* waited.

A host of biologis thralls kept to the far wall of the stateroom. One stood conspicuously apart from Uexküll's medicae detail – a slight figure draped in scarlet robes and fitted with a mask of whirring loupes. Glancing nervously at Promus, his fingers clacked and ratcheted like an aexactor's counting machine.

Magos Zygman Videns. Statistical Prognosticator.

'Why are you here, Nagasena?' said Promus, finally breaking the silence.

'Always so direct, Dio,' said Nagasena, adjusting the sword at his hip, a long, elegantly curved blade housed in a scabbard of lacquered wood, jade and mother-of-pearl. Its name was *Shoujiki,* which meant 'honesty' in a long-dead language.

'These are direct times.'

'Indeed they are,' said Nagasena, gesturing to the fragrant coils of steam rising from the pot, 'but not so direct as to absolve us of common courtesies.'

Promus shook his head. 'I have no time for your rituals.'

Nagasena leaned forwards and when he spoke his tone was freighted with authority. 'Then *make* time.'

Promus and Uexküll understood from whence came that authority and Nagasena reached over to pour the tea. First into the cups before his hosts, then into his own and that of Lady Veleda. Uexküll would not drink, of course, but not to offer him refreshment would be an unforgivable breach of etiquette. Nagasena waited for Promus to lift his cup before taking a drink himself.

'It is good,' said Promus. 'Very good.'

'It should be,' said Nagasena. 'It is a blend synthesised by Lady Veleda from a fragment of the *Kissa Yōjōki.*'

'I understood that text to be lost,' said Promus.

'It was long thought to have been burned in Narthan Dume's Night of Unremembering, yes,' agreed Nagasena.

'How is it you obtained a copy?' asked Uexküll.

'Conservatory teams,' said Lady Veleda in her broken Gothic. 'Working on fringes of Boeotian war-theatre. Uncover partial copy before Yeselti finally exhaust Emperor's patience.'

She grinned at Promus and said, 'Pages brought to Malcador before your kind take field. Lucky for us. Legions not kind to the past.'

Promus grunted and replaced his cup on the tabletop. 'You have nothing more vital to do than resurrecting lost teas?'

'Of course,' said Nagasena. 'But sometimes the means to restore body and soul must be indulged. After Nikaea, you of all people should understand the concept of balance. A mind cannot focus on death *all* the time.'

'Clearly you have not been keeping abreast of the campaigns waged by Horus and his fellow traitors,' said Promus.

'You are entirely wrong in that assumption,' said Nagasena.

'Is it news you bring?' asked Uexküll. 'Does the Emperor move against the Warmaster?'

'He does,' said Nagasena, unwilling to speak of the mission to the *Vengeful Spirit* and what it had cost.

'But that is not why you are here,' said Promus. 'Is it?'

'No. I require your assistance in another matter.'

'What matter?'

'The Sigillite requires us to travel to the orbital gaol of Kamiti Sona and interrogate three prisoners.'

'Kamiti Sona?' said Promus, a look of distaste crossing his pronounced features. 'No. I think not.'

Nagasena sighed and took a drink of his tea, an invigorating *ryokucha,* said to enhance the rejuvenating properties of the five vital organs. He used the pause to gather his thoughts and choose his next words carefully.

'These are no ordinary prisoners,' he said.

‘Legion?’ asked Promus.

‘Mortals, but ones of especial significance,’ said Nagasena.

‘Why do you require the *Arethusa?*’ asked Uexküll, the gibbet-harness hissing as he gestured to Antaka Cyvaan and Jambik Sosruko. ‘You have a ship and warriors of your own.’

‘The mechanistic nature of *Arethusa’*s fighting forces makes it a singularly suitable choice for this mission.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the Sigillite believes we will not be the only ones seeking to learn what these prisoners know.’

‘Who else might be looking?’

‘Survivors of the Fifteenth Legion,’ said Nagasena.

Promus grunted mirthlessly. ‘The Thousand Sons are dead. The Wolf King saw to that.’

‘Leman Russ was thorough, but it seems the Crimson King escaped his final judgement.’

‘How could you possibly know that?’ demanded Promus.

‘Malcador assures me the information comes from an unimpeachable source,’ said Nagasena, who had asked that selfsame question and received a similarly nebulous answer.

‘An unimpeachable source? That is all you will give us?’

‘It is all I know,’ said Nagasena.

‘Malcador and his secrets will be the death of us all,’ said Promus, shaking his head. ‘Very well, Yasu, tell me more of these prisoners. Who are they exactly?’

‘I am given to understand they were once remembrancers,’ said Nagasena. ‘Their vessel was taken as it fled Prospero’s destruction.’

‘If they were fleeing Prospero then they are servants of the Crimson King,’ snapped Promus. ‘What do you think they know?’

‘I do not know for certain, something relating to the nature of Primarch Magnus would be my guess,’ said Nagasena. ‘That the sons of the Crimson King desire this too is surely reason to reach these prisoners first, yes?’

Magos Uexküll leaned forwards. ‘Malcador intends to finish what the Wolf King began.’

‘You may be right,’ said Nagasena.

‘Then you will need more than cybernetic warriors,’ said Promus, standing and leaning with his fists pressed down on the table. ‘Men of iron whose courage is forged upon the anvil will not be enough.’

Nagasena nodded. ‘That is why I brought men of ice.’

EIGHT

The Orrery
Kamiti Sona
Equivalent exchange

Pain was a warrior's boon companion, the inevitable consequence of a violent life. Amon had tasted pain before, had known the agony of flesh torn by claw and blade, fire and shot. But the pain of his body rebuilding itself from the inside was a new and unwelcome sensation.

Hathor Maat had promised he would feel no pain, but Hathor Maat lied.

Amon could feel every splintered fragment and grinding motion of bone within his spine as the Pavoni regrew his shattered skeletal architecture. No chemical or psychic balm could dull the searing fire within him, a white-hot rod of iron rammed from the base of his neck to his pelvis.

Tension wracked his body, pain crackling around regrown nerves like an electric current. He told himself pain was good, that pain was his body waking up to the fact it could *feel*.

He no longer thought of the Pavoni adepts as healers, but excruciators. They trailed his golden support throne like sycophants as he willed it from his Stormbird.

Febrile aether winds circled the Obsidian Tower, chattering with machinations as the gunship leapt back into the air. The summit of the primarch's tower was no longer an enflamed spike but a flattened disc of glossy black stone, as though a scything blade had hacked away its spire with a single blow. The revealed surface was cut with intersecting lines and sigils Amon did not recognise – mystic arrangements that sent involuntary muscular spasms around his ruined body.

Magnus was waiting for him, kneeling with his back to him and clad in the robes of a Magister Templi of the Fellowships.

'My lord,' said Amon.

Magnus rose to his full height and turned towards him.

The distracted air the primarch had affected in Amon's pyramid was entirely absent. *This* was the primarch as Amon had known and loved him in his prime. *This* was the Magnus who had conquered the mountain of Aghoru, who had stood before the Emperor of Mankind with honour at Nikaea.

The urge to kneel was overwhelming, and Amon grunted in pain as his broken body tried to obey that ingrained imperative.

‘My son, my loyal equerry,’ said Magnus, coming forwards to lay a hand on Amon’s shoulder. ‘My friend.’

‘My lord,’ said Amon.

‘We begin anew today,’ said Magnus, moving to the cardinal points of the tower. As he moved from point to point, Amon began to see the underlying form of the rapture woven into the fabric of the tower. Its scope was breathtaking.

‘What are we beginning?’ said Amon, his support throne sliding through the air towards the centre of the tower.

‘You were right,’ said Magnus, balletic as he moved between each runic sigil, careful not to disturb the geomantic significance of their relationships to one another. ‘I cannot go on like this. I didn’t see it. Too caught up in the notion of preservation at any cost. But now I see what must be done.’

Power was building in the tower, spreading upwards and flowing through every living soul within it. Amon could feel its immaterial stone trembling with aetheric resonances that set his teeth on edge. Spikes of pain shot up his back as the speed of the boneweaving within his spine increased.

Seersight flickered at the edge of his vision, ghost images of futures unwritten: a city of black glass where a soul went to war with itself, a mantle unlooked for and a purpose forged in death, the endless horizon of a world-spanning ocean that made him ache with yearning…

Though it pained him to turn from such sights after so long spent in darkness, he quelled the visions. *Now* demanded his attention. *Now* was where the future would be forged.

‘What is happening?’ he asked.

‘It is the power of new beginnings,’ said Magnus. ‘Potential churning in the aether as it seeks to be made real.’

‘What are we beginning?’ said Amon once again.

‘How long has it been since we flew the Great Ocean together, my friend?’

‘Not since before the Wolves murdered Prospero.’

‘Too long, Amon, too long,’ said Magnus, animated with manic energy at the prospect of whatever plan he had in mind yet stubbornly refused to divulge. ‘We once bestrode the stars like gods, you and I, remember? We were wanderers in space and time, brother explorers of the farthest shores. We beheld the births of galaxies and watched the dancers at the end of time gutter and die. We will do so again, my son – I have *seen* it.’

The primarch’s energy was infectious, and Amon felt his heart quicken at the prospect of flying the Great Ocean with his father, unbound from this frail and decaying prison of ruined meat and bone.

‘Where do we fly?’ said Amon, rising through the enumerations, ready to loose his subtle body from his corporeal flesh.

Magnus returned to Amon's side and knelt before him.

'Lorgar was right,' he said. '*You* were right. To rebuild the lore of Prospero will kill me. It *is* killing me. But I believe there is another way.'

'What other way?'

'One you and I will create together,' said Magnus, stepping back towards the centre of his mystical convergence. 'At a place I will show you deep in the Great Ocean.'

Amon blinked as he saw hundreds of figures surrounding them. Standing around the tower's circumference were the scribes he had last seen in the recreation of the Hall of Amun-Re, the least of his father's splintered soul-shards.

Some burned brightly, others guttered like candle stubs. As one, they walked towards the centre of the tower and the whole from which they had been split. Some came with sure and confident strides, others with the limping gait of cripples.

No longer were they hooded, and Amon felt his certainty falter at the sight of them. Every aspect of Magnus' soul was exposed: his greatness, his spite, his nobility and his hubris. From the venal to the virtuous, the savage to the enlightened, no dark corner of his being remained unveiled.

'Now you see me for who I truly am,' said Magnus.

Amon wanted to look away, to preserve the perfect ideal of the Crimson King, for what son ever desired to learn his father was less than the god he had dreamed?

'I can no longer be riven,' said Magnus, as the scribes closed the noose on him. 'I can no longer deny the truth of my mortality. Ahriman will succeed and I will be one, or he will fail and I shall be nothing.'

The first soul-shard reached Magnus and stepped *into* him, became part of him once again. The primarch threw back his head as, one by one, each of the star-bright shards walked into him. With every addition, Magnus grew taller, became more vital, more *real.*

Piece by piece the Crimson King began his renewal.

Soon, those fragments of his soul that had been swept to the Planet of the Sorcerers were brought within, and now Magnus stood as a warrior-god and scholar king, resplendent in battleplate of crimson and furs of dappled ermine. His skin shone with vitality, and but for the nimbus of pellucid light shimmering over his skin and a telling quality of dangerously vulnerable *incompleteness,* Amon would have sworn that the Magnus of old stood before him.

'My lord,' he said, unashamed tears coursing down his cheeks. 'What do you require of me?'

Magnus knelt before Amon and took his paralysed hands.

‘We will build the greatest library ever known, greater than anything conceived by Ashurbanipal or Ptolemy Soter. One unconfined by walls of stone or restrictive Euclidean geometries. Together we will craft a legacy to eclipse even mythic Akasha in its ambition. Will you help me build it?’

‘Yes,’ wept Amon. ‘I will.’

‘Then fly with me, my son,’ said Magnus, pouring his power into Amon. ‘And together we will craft the Orrery!’

Bones creaked and sinews strained. New nerves burst into life and Amon threw his head back with a howl of agony.

His subtle body lifted free, surging into the sky.

And together they soared, father and son, their souls unbound and joyous as the Great Ocean opened up to them.

Kamiti Sona.

Promus had heard tales of it. Few among the Librarius had not. The truth or otherwise of its existence had never been openly acknowledged by the Silent Sisterhood, like a guilty secret between lovers, yet here they were approaching it. A psykana gaol, its whereabouts was known only to the highest ranked of the Sisterhood and the Emperor Himself. Its horrors went unrecorded and its inmates were gladly forgotten.

Circling at the farthest extent of a backwater system with no name, it orbited a dying star once every two hundred and forty-three years. Even with encrypted coordinates provided by a self-erasing flesh-thrall branded with the mark of the White Talon cadre, they almost missed it.

The *Arethusa* hung silent in the void alongside the *Doramaar.* Neither ship had been granted permission to dock with the facility, which had angered Promus until he saw Kamiti Sona through his Stormbird’s canopy.

Almost no light illuminated the far reaches of the system, and at first he thought the prison had been constructed upon the remnants of a titanic asteroid. But as the distance between the Stormbird and prison shrank, Promus saw no natural forces of gravity, time or pressure had created this place.

Kamiti Sona was city-sized debris from a cataclysmic explosion in an earlier epoch – an explosion that had set it adrift in the stars until Imperial might yoked and stabilised its orbit.

Extrapolating the curvature of its upper surfaces, Promus guessed it had once been part of an impossibly vast sphere, a void station the size of a small moon. Its gnarled surfaces were a barely visible mix of black ice, geometric rock and angular steel. Metres of permafrost coated its upper surface, from which rose ruined spires of sepulchral towers and funerary structures of subtly inhuman dimensions.

The corpse of something wrought by alien minds.

Frosted spars of dark metal jutted from its broken flanks and fronds of drifting steelwork trailed from the base of the disembowelled structure.

More than just a bleak place, it was a dead one too.

Promus could read nothing from Kamiti Sona. No minds, no life, no sense that anything but frozen emptiness might be found within. Not unexpected for a gaol of the Silent Sisterhood, but still unsettling and discomfiting for a psyker.

Potent wards were at work, null-arrays and blanking fields to keep high-psy-function prisoners contained. Prisoners presumably deemed too dangerous or too impossible to execute.

Promus had no wish to set foot on Kamiti Sona, but the orders signed by Malcador bore the highest seal of authority.

'Who are these prisoners? What do they know?' he whispered, looking through the frosted glass on the canopy's side.

Yasu Nagasena's modified Aquila lander held station on his upper prow quarter, its swept-forward wings matt-black and emblazoned with a serpentine dragon.

They had not spoken since their first meeting, save to confirm waypoints and rendezvous coordinates between the *Arethusa* and the *Doramaar*. The memory of the lost *Holkenberg* still lay between them, each man holding the other responsible for what had been sacrificed over Jupiter's baleful red eye.

The Stormbird began climbing, following a previously inloaded approach vector. Kamiti Sona's boarding protocols were necessarily strict, especially for psykers. Promus gasped as the dampening effect of the psy-field hit him, a cloying sensation that felt like being enveloped in impenetrable fog.

His mortal senses were undimmed, but having his psychic sensibilities blunted was like being plunged thousands of metres underwater in an instant. Sounds became robbed of tone, tactile sensations felt second-hand and his vision became bland and colourless, bereft of crisp vigour.

Promus held the sides of his bucket seat in a crushing grip, as though the world might fade entirely if he did not hold on tightly enough. He was a warrior of the Legiones Astartes and death held little terror to him, but being cut off from his higher senses left his mouth dry and his gut knotted with tension.

The icy topside of Kamiti Sona raced beneath the gunship, meteor-cratered and belching plumes of vapour like miniature cryovolcanoes. Whip antennae, rotating dishes and networks of null vanes that smoked with dissipating immaterial energies flashed past, but Promus ignored them, entranced by the sight of the vessel berthed on Kamiti Sona's dark side.

Its outline was all but invisible, a silent hunter of the void. Unmarked by any identifying symbols, its hull was utterly black and non-reflective. Even denied his psy-sense, Promus felt the misery that bled from this ship.

He did not know its name, only its designation.

One of the Black Ships, a harvester of warlocks.

He turned from its bilious silhouette as the inloaded flight data threw the Stormbird's engines into reverse and brought it to a rapid halt. A metres-thick blast door opened silently beneath it and blazing stablights shone into the void. A shaft wide enough for the Stormbird and Aquila to descend side by side was revealed and both craft rotated on their centre lines, engines vectoring to guide them down into Kamiti Sona. The Black Ship was lost to sight, and the bleak alien landscape of ice and hopelessness disappeared, replaced by a shaft of engine-scorched steel, hazard striping and blinking sodium strobes.

Promus grunted as a crushing grip of ice clamped down on his mind. The psy-wards beyond the prison were potent, but those within were merciless in their unstinting suppression.

He barely felt the impact of the landing gear on planed rock or the hard imposition of gravity. His armour pressed him to the seat and every limb felt weighted with lead. Even the air felt oppressed, deprived of some vital animus by the stagnancy of the prison's environment.

It took Promus an act of will to rise. Every movement was an effort, as though the fibre-bundle muscles of his battleplate were resisting his every step. He made his way back to the troop compartment, where those elements of his command given leave to enter Kamiti Sona awaited.

A dozen Vorax battle-automata under the command of Datasmith Vindicatrix stood mag-locked to the deck. Magos Videns sat at the rear of the compartment, clutching a pair of dataslates to his chest, as far as possible from the hunched, predatory cybernetics.

Credence Araxe, the psychopathic Master of Ursarax, was already inspecting the cybernetic warrior-thralls under his command, issuing orders in barking Lingua-technis. His Lorica Thallax armour was painted a deep gold-red and the dome of his helm had been replaced with a crystalflex cowl that revealed the fleshless skull beneath.

Promus marched past them without speaking, his mouth gummed and his throat compressed with thirst. The assault ramp lowered and void-cold air misted as it met the comparative warmth of the troop compartment. He swallowed his distaste and stepped down the ramp as though a welcome from the Avenging Son, Roboute Guilliman himself, lay beyond.

The drop-shaft had brought the Stormbird and Aquila into an angular hangar of dull metal, the walls cut with Imperial eagles over older, more angular engravings, like a hastily scrawled palimpsest. Moisture condensed on the cooling hulls of the aircraft and huge vents clattered overhead as they finished decompression protocols.

Nagasena's Aquila remained sealed, its gloss-black hull creaking as it expanded, the engines still throbbing with power. Promus saw its fuselage had been widened and strengthened beyond the customary specifications required for mortal dignitaries and officers.

He turned from the lander as a detachment of dome-helmed Kastelan battle-automata entered the hangar chamber through an armoured vestibule. They advanced in perfect, thudding lockstep. Carapace-mounted phosphor-blasters smoked with heat and hissing blue flames burned in the perforated barrels of their incendines.

A woman in form-fitting armour of bronze marched before them, a pair of swords sheathed cross-wise at her back and an ivory-plumed helm worked in the form of a hunting hawk nestled in the crook of her left arm.

At the sight of the battle robots, the Vorax spread out behind Promus, limbs tense and agile bodies rocking back and forth. Vindicatrix, robed in midnight-blue and encased in a rapidly unfolding harness-array of glowing slates and manual control mechanisms, kept their aggression in check for now.

Araxe and his blue-armoured Ursarax fighters formed up behind Promus like sprinters awaiting a starting gun, ready to erupt into violence at a moment's notice.

The Kastelans kept coming, crashing to a halt five metres from Promus. He studied the woman. Her age was hard to judge, her skin firm and her jawline slender. But her eyes… Her eyes gave her away, empty and unreadable. Even in a prison complex expressly designed to annul psykers, she still stood out as a void in the world. A soulless pariah.

Promus' skin crawled at the sight of her, unreasoning hatred generating an aggression response. His armour responded, but he suppressed its engaging combat systems, knowing his reaction was a purely animal response to the void where her soul should be.

Her helm plume marked her as a senior within her order, but Promus saw no sign she had taken the Vow of Tranquillity.

At least he could talk to her and have her respond.

'I am Sister Caesaria,' she said. 'I am commandant of Kamiti Sona and your kind is not welcome here.'

'My name is Dio Promus,' he began. 'I am here at–'

'I know who you are,' said Caesaria. 'Do you imagine I would allow anyone of unconfirmed identity within this facility?'

'Then I will assume you know why we are here?'

'She knows, *ja,*' said a gruff, laconic voice coming from the direction of Nagasena's lander. 'She doesn't much like it, but she knows. Ja, she does.'

Promus recognised the accent, rich with acoustically prominent tones suited to the oral traditions of its speakers.

Now he knew why the Aquila had been modified.

Yasu Nagasena stepped down from the serpent-winged craft behind a swaggering pack of five legionaries in fur-mantled plate the colour of a midwinter's dawn over Fenris.

'Your "men of ice" are Space Wolves?' said Promus.

Nagasena grinned and nodded.

'Allow me to present the warriors of Bödvar Bjarki.'

Sailing the Great Ocean was an ordeal for most travellers, something to be endured, but for Hathor Maat it was a chance to directly connect with the source of his powers.

Even Fellowships whose star was in decline were empowered.

The surging tides of the empyrean had made the Pyrae into gods of hellfire, and bulkheads throughout the starship crackled with flames as the *Khemet* hurtled towards its uncertain destination. The Raptora shared a measure of that bellicose energy, while the seersight of the Corvidae remained stubbornly cataracted. The Athanaeans knew balance, but the Pavoni… Their powers waxed and waned with each ringing of the shipboard watch bells.

And, right now, the tides were against him.

'You are sure you can do this?' asked Lucius.

'Yes,' said Hathor Maat.

'I don't feel anything.'

'We haven't yet begun.'

'Then you should start.'

'I will,' snapped Hathor Maat. 'If you stop interrupting.'

They sat facing one another in the centre of Hathor Maat's quarters, a chamber of mirrors that offered no respite from reflections. Lucius was armoured, his sword resting across his knees. Hathor Maat wore the powder-blue robes of the Pavoni.

An *Ourania* circle of powdered *umbilicus veneris* enclosed them, its cardinal points marked by crystals of rose quartz.

'Understand that once we begin there is no turning back,' said Hathor Maat.

'I don't turn back from anything,' said Lucius, and the horrific scars webbing his shaven skull squirmed like worms beneath the skin. 'I only ever go forwards.'

Hathor Maat nodded; that much was obvious.

The swordsman's aura was in constant flux, a seething hell storm of conflicting emotions and razored desires that could never be satisfied. Life and death warred within him, the potential for immortality or eternal damnation. Only an iron

discipline kept the storm within Lucius from consuming him utterly, a determination never to yield that only the truly insane could know.

'How are you even alive?' marvelled Hathor Maat.

'Can't you tell?' asked Lucius. 'I thought your order were all about the workings of meat.'

'Adepts of the Pavoni know a great many things, but we are not gods.'

'Funny, I get the feeling that's *exactly* what you think you are,' said Lucius, his almost reptilian eyes flicking towards the walls of mirrors. 'A raging narcissist if ever I saw one, and I've seen the very best of them.'

'Says the man seeking to be beautiful again.'

'There is a shortage of great beauty in this sterile galaxy,' said Lucius with a simpering grin. 'It would be a shame to deprive it of mine a minute longer than necessary.'

'You cut your own face off,' said Hathor Maat. 'Tell me why you mutilated yourself so completely. And speak truly – it will make my task that much harder if you lie.'

'I wanted to make myself ugly,' said Lucius, without shame or hesitation.

'Why?'

'Because a dead man spoiled my perfect beauty with his fist,' said Lucius. 'And if I couldn't be perfectly beautiful, I would be perfectly ugly.'

'Then we are kindred spirits,' said Hathor Maat.

Lucius nodded. 'You should begin, brother.'

Hathor Maat let out a calming breath and eased his mind into the seventh enumeration.

'Picture yourself as you were, as you would wish to be again,' he said. 'Let no other thought enter your mind, let no other desire touch you.'

'Why not?'

'As within, so without.'

'Done.'

Hathor Maat slid heightened awareness of flesh into the swordsman's body. His initial reaction was one of disgust.

Oily skin, dense muscle mass, meat and gristle, ossified bones and blue-glistening organs that had no place inside this grotesquely enlarged transhuman frame.

And every part of it rotting to pulp with every breath.

This was unstoppable entropic decay, a countdown to extinction.

Slowly Hathor Maat descended into the sixth enumeration, letting his disgust ebb as the true genius of the Emperor's design opened up to him.

In an age of peace, a legionary might endure for millennia or more, but he would not live forever.

The immortality of the Legions was a myth.

Eventually the biological mechanisms sustaining them would fail and the horrifying descent into decrepitude would begin. Traditional life-prolonging drugs and surgery were ineffective on transhuman physiology. Martial cults spoke of a warrior's legacy as his immortality, but Hathor Maat wanted more.

Death held little terror for him, but the infirmities of age and the weaknesses of a failing body were a constant horror. The artes of the Pavoni had kept him beautiful, had allowed him to avoid the bland homogenisation of features common to warriors of the Legions.

It had kept him unique, but it couldn't last forever.

He had looked to Ahriman to save him, to save them *all.*

But Ahriman had failed. Despite everything, Sobek had died, reduced to nothing more than fine dust. He knew Ahriman held him responsible for their failure. The great Chief Librarian was unable to see past his own limitations and was sure to place the blame squarely on Hathor Maat. Ever since Sobek's death, he felt Ahriman giving him sidelong glances when he thought Hathor Maat wasn't looking, suspicious and jealous.

A sigh of frustration escaped as he felt his grip on this most delicate level of perception slip. Quelling thoughts of Ahriman, he forced himself to concentrate on the task at hand.

Lucius had cut deep. Flesh had a long memory and the pain of its disfigurement was still strong. It surfaced in his own features, and Hathor Maat flinched as he felt his skin burn with repercussive pain.

That too could be managed. Hathor Maat allowed his will to be guided by the swordsman's absurdly simplistic view of himself: chiselled jaw, strong cheeks, wide eyes, noble brow and aquiline nose. The most beautiful hero imaginable.

Lucius cried out as the bones of his skull cracked under Hathor Maat's aether-sculpting. Cells long since ruined were rendered functional, withered veins and arteries ripened with newly flowing hyper-oxygenated blood. Poorly healed breaks were erased as bruised musculature smoothed and soft tissue was reshaped to make Lucius more beautiful than he had ever been in reality.

With the underlying structure restored, the gouged scars receded into waxen flesh as the swordsman's dead skin mask was peeled away to reveal a face Hathor Maat had last seen upon the grand dais at Ullanor.

The connection between them broke and Hathor Maat groaned, the aftershocks of so great an expenditure of power wracking him with pain as his aetheric humours sought balance.

'It is done,' he sighed.

Lucius lifted his hands to his face, fingertips exploring his new features like a blind man. His chest heaved in a series of hyperventilating exhalations that turned

to bubbling, hysterical laughter.

Lucius stood and his new reflection stared back from a host of gleaming mirrors in an infinitely regressing *mise en abyme,* beautiful and perfect in every detail.

The very image of Fulgrim himself.

The swordsman was long gone and war musters rang throughout the *Khemet'*s decks, but Hathor Maat remained confined within his chambers. Of all the disciplines of the Fellowships, biomancy took the greatest toll on its practitioner.

And the Pavoni Law of Equivalent Exchange was unequivocal.

To obtain, something of equal value must be lost.

Lucius had a new face, and Hathor Maat was paying the price for that, but having so sublime a warrior in his debt would be worth the pain.

He still felt what the Phoenician's warrior had done to himself with a shard of broken glass, still felt skin and muscle parting before its edge. His face felt wet with blood, but when he touched his fingers to his cheeks they came away dry.

Hathor Maat drew in a fearful breath.

His fingers were trembling as though palsied.

'Repercussions are normal,' he said, drawing his hands into fists and rising to the first enumeration. 'To be expected.'

Hathor Maat sent restorative power down through his arms, healing ruptured cells and halting the tremors in his hands. Bladework calluses on the heels of his palms and middle fingers faded as his skin renewed itself.

He exhaled slowly as Ahriman's voice resonated within his skull. Even drained by his workings, he heard the Chief Librarian's excitement.

+*Hathor Maat, I need you on the embarkation deck. The Fellowships are mustering.*+

+You have a destination?+

+*Better. I have brought us where we need to be.*+

+I shall be there directly,+ he sent, but Ahriman had already broken the link between them.

Hathor Maat stood and smoothed his robes.

And a sickening wave of nausea swept through him. Multiple images flooded his perception, like a host of transparencies overlaid on top of one another. He fell to his knees, hands flat on the floor and the sensory assault instantly ceased.

Hathor Maat drew in a panicked breath, blinking away the dizzying sense memory of his chambers viewed from a host of skewed angles. Undulant pressure squirmed in his palms and he rocked back on his haunches, drawing his hands into fists and resting them on his knees.

Slowly he turned his wrists and opened his hands.

'Please, no…' he whispered.

Unblinking, myopic eyes stared up at him from his palms and every one of his fingertips.

NINE

The neophyte
Star-cunning
The Scarlet Orrery

The weeping wasn't the worst thing about Kamiti Sona.

As he drifted in and out of chemical and psychic fugues, the dull sounds of sorrow no longer touched him. The sterile gloom was filled with endless sobbing, grunts – sometimes in pain, sometimes in what passed here for pleasure – plaintive wails, pleas for help, and the rhythmic drumming of fists or skulls against the impervious metal of a cell wall.

After a while, the only sorrow anyone cared for in Kamiti Sona was their own. How long had he been here? He didn't know. Time was impossible to judge, but years must have passed since the fright-masked warriors with yellow eyes had thrown him to the Silent Sisters.

It wasn't even the violence. The brutality of many inmates could not be subdued by chemicals or the threat of cortical overload collars. Beatings were a daily occurrence, and deaths frequent. He kept clear of trouble when it reared its fists or bared a crude blade. The worst of it had passed him by, but not all trouble was avoidable. The gouged socket where his left eye had once sat was proof of that.

Nor was it their gaolers. The half-human, half-cybernetic servitors that patrolled the metalled corridors and tomb-like cells were predictable, and the bronze-armoured Sisters used force only when necessary. When they did, it was swift and shocking and utterly without mercy, but there was always purpose to it.

Nor was it the nightmares.

When silence fell in Kamiti Sona it fell completely. When the sorrow finally ended, when the violence abated and their captors withdrew, the soundless void that was left was rich with nightmares.

Nightmares of skull-masked interrogators with iron-braided beards and yellowed eyes, of agonising trawls through his mind that left him screaming and soiled. Endlessly repeated questions drilled into his skull like hot skewers, questions to which he had no answer.

One accusation laid against him again and again.

Maleficarum.

Over and over in unending hammer-blows.

Maleficarum. Maleficarum. Maleficarum. Maleficarum…

It broke him. These men and their questions and insults and agonies. They stripped him of every last shred of dignity and made him less than human.

But eventually it stopped. Eventually they were satisfied he had told them all he knew, that every last secret had been ripped out of him.

And when it stopped, he thanked them.

He loved them for making the pain go away.

But not even the nightmares of pain and the wolf-cloaked interrogators were the worst part of Kamiti Sona.

The worst of it was the undiluted hate that now filled him.

Hate for the one who had put him here.

Ahzek Ahriman.

Bödvar Bjarki was lean compared to his brothers of the *Vlka Fenryka,* and the warrior in the unmarked plate walking alongside him was half a head taller. Hawk-nosed and clear-eyed, he had the look of eagles upon him.

'You're one of Jarl Guilliman's, aren't you?' he said.

'I was,' said the warrior as Sister Caesaria and her hulking battle robots led them through an adamantium gate. Beyond the gate was a long, ribbed chamber with dark walls glistening wetly like something fresh-risen from the ocean depths.

Bjarki nodded towards the mortal warrior in lacquered armour with the finely balanced sword. Followed by thrall-warriors of flesh and iron, he walked with Sister Caesaria, answering her questions with short, vague answers.

'Yasu Nagasena tells me you are called Dio Promus.'

'That is correct.'

'You look like one of the stone men the Upplanders build on Fenris,' said Bjarki. 'They look pretty for maybe a season, but they fall down as soon as the land's roots get soft.'

'And you look like the statue of Bardylis carved over the Civitas Gate on Macragge.'

'Who is Bardylis? A Jarl of the Five Hundred Worlds?'

'No, a barbarian defeated by Lord Guilliman in his youth.'

Bjarki grinned, exposing his fangs. 'If he killed this Bardylis, why raise a statue to him?'

'He did not kill him,' said Promus. 'He spared his life and in return Bardylis swore an oath of loyalty to Lord Guilliman at the Gathering of Paonia, which proves even a savage can recognise greatness.'

Bjarki turned to his warriors with a mock grimace.

'I think I have just been insulted.'

'*You should kill him,*' said Svafnir Rackwulf in guttural Wurgen.

Bjarki nodded as though considering Rackwulf's advice.

‘What did he just say?’ asked Promus.

‘He asks if you are star-cunning like me.’

Bjarki watched Promus’ gaze roam over his armour, noting the runic cuts encircling his heart-cage, the toothed amulet set upon his breast and the lupine talismans hung from iron cords looped around his arms.

‘I am a psyker, yes,’ agreed Promus. ‘Like you. What is it your lot calls it? A Rune Priest?’

‘I think maybe we are both very powerful,’ nodded Bjarki, spitting on the dark metal of the floor. ‘But *here?* That counts for nothing. This place is not kind to brothers of the wyrd.’

‘The wyrd?’

Bjarki spun on his heel to face his brothers, walking backwards with a disbelieving shake of his head.

‘*Fenrys hjolda!* Dio Promus knows not of the wyrd.’

‘He is Upplander and comes with iron men instead of clan-brothers,’ said Harr Balegyr, his one good eye hooded and hostile. ‘Why would he?’

‘You serve the Sigillite, yes?’ said Bjarki, turning back to Promus as they passed into a tall chamber with glyph-cut walls that tapered inwards to a point far above. ‘Like Yasu Nagasena?’

‘I serve the Emperor,’ said Promus, and in his mind’s eye he saw the face of Varaestus Sarilo and countless others, ‘but not like Nagasena.’

‘You kill the Allfather’s enemies?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you serve Him like us.’

‘Why are you here, Bödvar Bjarki?’ asked Promus as squads of the Silent Sisterhood appeared from hexagonal tunnels on either side to march with them. The Vorax and Ursarax cohorts tensed, but Promus shook his head.

‘Why do you *think* we are here?’

‘To stand at my side and slay me if I turn traitor?’

‘Maybe. Maybe not,’ said Bjarki, tapping a blackened shred of oath paper fixed to his armour with wax imprinted with the Sigillite’s seal. ‘We do not relish such tasks. The Wolf King commands it, so we obey.’

‘I am flattered,’ said Promus, ‘but I thought your sire only sent watch-packs to the halls of his brother-primarchs?’

Bjarki gave a weary shrug. ‘We are not a true watch-pack – we do not have that honour. But we still watch, yes? Because you and I both know that of those who turn, star-cunning make the worst enemies.’

He looked Promus in the eye. ‘Prospero taught us that.’

Promus halted his march and met Bjarki’s gaze. The Vorax bringing up the rear hissed binaric irritation at the delay.

‘You were there?’ he asked. ‘You fought the Thousand Sons?’

Bjarki nodded. ‘We lost many brothers in the fight, but we killed the Daemon Lord’s sons.’

‘Daemon Lord?’

‘Ja, Magnus. The King in Crimson,’ said Bjarki, covering one eye with his hand. ‘Svafnir Rackwulf back there slew more of his red sorcerers than any could count with that bloody great null-spear of his. And Olgyr Widdowsyn? He alone of his pack survived the last battle before the great pyramid of glass.’

Bjarki pointed to a barrel-chested legionary with a forked beard and a clicking, mechanised red eye. ‘Harr Balegyr tore his own eye out when facing a sorcerer-lord rather than suffer the maleficarum he sent to kill him.’

‘Aye, and the *skjalds* never let me forget it,’ bellowed Balegyr, causing the Sisters to turn in alarm. He rapped the knuckle of his thumb against the eye. ‘Like I need reminding.’

‘And that,’ said Bjarki, nodding towards a warrior whose legs and one arm were the bare metal of augmetics, ‘is Gierlothnir Helblind, shield-bearer of *Tra*. He who stood over Widdowsyn as fiends of the Underverse tried to cut his thread.’

‘He is more bionic than flesh.’

Bjarki leaned in as if sharing a joke. ‘It’s why we call him *Spear Inviter*. He welcomes pain a little too much, I think.’

‘Don’t we all?’ asked Promus.

‘Lemuel?’

He looked up, blinking in the gloom.

Shapes. A faint outline of two women silhouetted in the door of his cell. His hands instinctively tightened on the ceramic urn he cradled. He had kept it safe all these years and everyone in Kamiti Sona knew never to touch it. For reasons Lemuel was never able to fathom, even the Silent Sisters turned a blind eye to it.

The woman who’d spoken took a step into his cell. Her skin had once been beautifully tanned, but like every soul within Kamiti Sona, it was now light-starved and ghoulishly pallid. Her hair, once long and dark, was now grey and cropped.

Only her eyes still held to their vitality, one emerald-green, the other hazel flecked with gold. Her companion was fine-boned and dark-skinned, but she too was blanched and hollowed out by confinement.

‘Camille?’ said Lemuel. ‘Chaiya?’

‘Yes,’ said Camille. ‘Are you ready?’

‘Ready?’

‘We were going to walk together, you remember?’

‘We were?’ he said, his voice little more than a parched wheeze. ‘Yes, a walk. Together.’

Like everything within Lemuel’s mind, his recollection of Camille and Chaiya was fractured and unreliable. He thought they had been friends once, somewhere that felt far away and long ago. They remembered that too, so it was probably true.

His life before Kamiti Sona was a book with pages that turned too fast and with some of the words missing. His most cherished memories were gone, torn from his mind or left so fragmentary as to be meaningless.

But despite all the skull-masked interrogators had done to them, all that had been broken inside their heads, they could still remember that friendship.

‘Yes,’ he said again. ‘We’d like that.’

Lemuel smiled and pushed himself from the mattress laid against the wall of his cell. Together with a rubberised bowl half filled with piss, it was the only furniture permitted.

He took a moment to steady himself. He remembered being a big man once, but his frame was spare and wasted after years of prison food.

‘Where will we walk today?’ he asked.

‘Perhaps a stroll through the Elysian Fields?’ suggested Camille. ‘Before ending at the Aspodel Meadows?’

‘You always imagine the best places,’ said Lemuel as they stood aside to let him pass. Camille smiled and nodded to the urn he carried.

‘Hello, Kallista,’ she said.

They left the upper levels with its rows of cells and descended to the main floor. This part of Kamiti Sona was a vast, arched space hundreds of metres in width and many hundreds in height. The ceiling was a curving vault, its black walls of smooth stone gridded with alcove cells like reliquary chambers in a vast catacomb.

What light there was came from the walls themselves, unchanging and eternal. A lifeless illumination that leached all it touched of vitality. Over a thousand people were housed in the chamber. Like Lemuel, Camille and Chaiya, they wore dirty smocks and chafing collars of dark metal that felt heavier than they looked and kept their wearers in a torpid state of mind.

Some inmates gathered in small groups, while others wandered listlessly from place to place in their own private miseries. Most remained in their cells, too broken and too exhausted to rise from their soiled mattresses.

Camille knelt to talk to a sour-faced mother with a small boy of around six years. Births were strictly forbidden in Kamiti Sona, so the child must have arrived with her.

‘I think I remember him as a babe in arms,’ said Lemuel.

‘Has it really been so long?’ said Chaiya.

‘What’s his name?’ asked Lemuel. ‘I can’t recall.’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, and her eyes filled with tears.

Lemuel had fleeting memories of knowing Chaiya in better times. He remembered her strength and poise. To see her so lost was like looking in a mirror.

‘It’s Pheres,’ said Camille, rising and taking Chaiya’s hand. ‘Pheres, remember? His mother is Medea, and her son is Pheres.’

Pheres, yes, that was it. Frail and thin-boned and given to extended bouts of overblown weeping and petulance. Not an easy child to like, but what kind of a childhood could he have in so awful a place?

‘Yes,’ said Chaiya, and Lemuel could see her struggle to embed the name in her memory. ‘Yes, Pheres.’

‘Come on, let’s keep walking,’ said Camille, leading them away from Pheres and his sullen mother. ‘We’re walking through the golden fields of Elysium. A land where there is no want, no hunger and only bliss.’

Lemuel smiled, trying to picture the blessed lands. Only Camille could conjure such vivid imagery with her words. Had that been her calling before coming here? Was she a teller of tales, a playwright or poet?

‘The sun is golden on our skin,’ continued Camille as they moved across the floor. ‘It’s warm, and the sky is blue, the colour of the open ocean. The wind stirs the crops and the aroma of cut stalks and harvested grain fills the air.’

Coppered servo-skulls flew overhead, shock-calipers buzzing with lethal energy, but Lemuel ignored them, allowing his mind to escape somewhere beautiful.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked.

‘There’s a villa ahead,’ said Camille, the words freighted with her own longing. ‘Fig trees grow in the courtyard, their branches heavy with fruit, and children are playing in their shade. There’s a table set with food fresh from the fields and there’s sweet wine in earthenware jugs, ready to be poured. All our friends are waiting for us.’

Camille and Chaiya held hands as they walked.

They had been lovers before coming here and nothing they had endured since had broken that bond. Lemuel held to a fragment of memory, a woman with sad eyes waving goodbye to him from a roof veranda, but who she was remained out of reach.

Malika? Was that her name? Who was she to him?

He couldn’t remember, and that loss tormented him.

But he still had Kallista.

She was dead. He knew that, of course.

Her ashes filled the urn he carried.

Lemuel could not remember the details of how she died, only the name and face of her killer. Ahzek Ahriman. A name without meaning or attachment, a focus for the terrifying hatred he carried inside.

A hatred that sustained Lemuel in the times between Camille's pleasant fictions, when he could not keep the nightmares of wolf-cloaked warriors and pain at bay.

'Get away!' cried a screeching voice, dragging him from his reverie of blue skies and sunshine, sweet wine and fresh food. Lemuel flinched as a near-naked man with a shaven scalp leapt out in front of him.

'Back off, Prinn,' said Camille. 'We're just walking.'

'No! You can't stand there! This is Prinn's way out!' he yelled, his eyes darting between them and the floating servo-skulls. 'You can't be here! They'll see! They'll *see!*'

Prinn's entire body was covered with infected weals and scabs where he'd scratched himself raw. He lunged forwards and Lemuel tripped, almost losing his grip on Kallista's urn.

'Get away!' screamed Prinn, spittle flying from his mouth as he stood over Lemuel, clawing the air with bloodied fingernails. 'This is where they're coming for me. They're coming to take me with them this time!'

'I said back off, Prinn,' repeated Camille, pushing the madman away and cocking a fist at her shoulder.

Prinn continued to claw the air with increasing desperation. He sank to his knees and ripped his fingernails down his cheeks hard enough to draw blood. He shook his head and burst into tears.

'I'm not worthy yet and they don't forgive that,' sobbed Prinn. 'Do you know what happens to those who aren't worthy?'

'No, and I don't care,' snapped Camille, pushing past the lunatic.

'They promised,' wailed Prinn. 'I tried and tried. I said the words they whispered, but they never answered! They promised this was where they'd come for me.'

Chaiya offered her hand to Lemuel, but he ignored it, clutching Kallista's urn to his chest as he climbed to his feet. They left Prinn weeping and tearing his skin, all thoughts of escape to fantasies of the Elysium Fields forgotten.

'Crazy bastard,' said Camille.

Caesaria and her Kastelans led them deeper into Kamiti Sona through a succession of geometric chambers somewhere between abandoned fane-crypts and fabricatus temples. The sense of a place monstrously repurposed was evident in the uneasy symbiosis of ancient architecture and human technology.

At length, the journey ended before an enormous gate of polished metal, carved with more of the disturbingly alien glyphs. Heavy chains of dark iron ran from two enormous metal berthing rings to darkened alcoves on either side. Within each alcove, the shadowed suggestion of a vast statue cast in dulled bronze was barely visible.

Weapon turrets clattered as auto-loaders fed belts of shells into breeches.

Promus licked his lips as he felt his mouth dry a little at the sight of the wide-muzzled autocannons. He had no doubt they were intended to gun down rogue psykers, but what practices were in place to prevent them engaging psykers who were *not* prisoners?

As if reading his mind, Bjarki chuckled and said, 'Now we will see if this place can tell the difference between star-cunning and maleficarum.'

The targeting mechanisms blinked from red to green, and Promus let out a relieved breath.

Bjarki grinned and slapped a hand on his shoulder guard.

'You were worried for a moment,' he said.

'I do not entirely trust weapons without a soul.'

'Yet you surround yourself with such things.'

'It suits my purpose for the moment.'

'And what purpose is that?'

'My own.'

Bjarki turned to address his warriors.

'We must keep a close eye on this one,' he said with a toothed grin. 'He keeps secrets like the gothi.'

'Then tell him to keep them to himself,' offered Svafnir Rackwulf. 'No good can come of learning them.'

The other Wolves grunted in agreement, and Promus relaxed his grip on the hilt of the gladius at his hip.

Sister Caesaria marched to the gate and placed both hands upon it, as if to push it wide open.

'That's a big gate, and you are only small,' Bjarki called out to her. 'Do you want some help?'

She ignored him and stood unmoving for several seconds until a bass rumble sounded from the alcoves to either side of the gate. A deafening bray of horns, like a huntsman's call, shook the dust from the upper reaches of the chamber.

'Fenrys hjolda!' cried Gierlothnir Helblind, bringing his shield to bear as the statues stepped forwards with booming strides. The Wolves ran to their Rune Priest, though they could surely do nothing against such giants.

'God-engines,' said Bjarki in amazement.

The *Arethusa*'s automata and iron thrall-warriors shrank from these apex beasts, cowed by their majesty.

'Warhounds,' said Promus.

The two Titans growled in hostile binaric, venting plumes of hot petrochemical exhaust. Their enormous weapons were kill-ready and scented oils drizzled from the bronzed plates of their armour like baptismal rain.

They turned to the gate and bent their shoulders, legs bracing and colossal servo-motors straining as they matched their strength against its weight.

At first it seemed as though its mass would defeat them.

Then, with a groan of grinding stone, a thin seam of light appeared at the centre of the gate. Concussive shocks travelled the walls as the Warhounds pushed the gate wider, millimetre by millimetre.

'Something's amiss,' said Olgyr Widdowsyn, tearing off his helm and dropping to one knee.

'What is he doing?' said Promus as the Wolf closed his one good eye and placed an ear to the ground, palms flat to either side of his shaven, tattooed skull.

Bjarki held up his hand. 'Olgyr Widdowsyn knows better than any dowser when land roots grow soft.'

'Land roots?'

'Ja, when Fenris chooses to drag land down into the World-forge beneath the oceans.'

Promus had only a vague idea what that meant, but sensed trouble as Yasu Nagasena ran back towards them, one hand pressed to his ear, the other clutching the hilt of his sword.

Olgyr Widdowsyn pushed himself to his feet.

'What say you?' said Bjarki.

'This place was struck,' said the Wolf. 'From without.'

'Struck?' said Promus as his helm-vox crackled with the distorted, simulacra-voice of Magos Umwelt Uexküll.

'*Prom…ano…r vess…l is… in…d!*'

'Say again, Uexküll,' ordered Promus. 'I repeat, say again.'

The static fell away, and this time there was no mistaking the master of the *Arethusa*'s warning.

'*Promus, another vessel is inbound!*'

Nagasena read the change in Promus' body language.

'You heard?' he asked.

Promus nodded. 'Another vessel.'

'It's them,' said Bjarki. 'It's the red sorcerers.'

'Hit it again,' ordered Ignis, sending a precision firing solution to the empowered lance battery in the *Khemet*'s prow. The oculus bay flashed with actinic light and

an explosion bloomed on the orbital gaol's flank, exactly where Ignis expected.

A geyser of blue flame ejected from the breach, quickly snuffed out by hard vacuum. A mist of debris hundreds of kilometres in diameter mushroomed from the impact site. A pair of branching towers, like leafless trees in winter, spiralled into the void.

Ignis sat in the *Khemet*'s command throne, eyes locked on the oculus bay and drinking in bewilderingly swift data-flows: ordnance trajectories, attack intercepts, thrust vectors and angles of deflection. Woven so densely as to be unintelligible to anyone other than an adept versed in the *calcularcana* of the Order of Ruin, but supremely beautiful to Ignis.

A perfect synergy of mathematical convergences and statistical certainties, void-war fought under the aegis of Ruin was, to Ignis, simply a matter of manipulating numerologically significant equations of breathtaking elegance. He parsed endless streams of numbers without error, distributing aspect corrections, course changes and firing solutions to the crew with breathtaking speed and clarity.

'Portside manoeuvring arrays, thirty-six per cent thrust for two point seven seconds. Reciprocal compensation to starboard on cessation. On my mark. *Mark.*'

The *Khemet* responded to his command like a trained colt, sliding through the darkness with the verve and aggression of a much smaller vessel.

The flagstones vibrated to volleys of macro-cannon fire from the broadside batteries far below. Mere distraction fire – explosive bluster to keep the two vessels at high anchor on the ventral aspect of Kamiti Sona wary.

+*Forward lance array primed and charged,*+ sent Tolbek from the prow gun deck. The Pyrae adepts were down there, bleeding the heat build-up that normally restricted such a powerful weapon's rate of discharge and empowering its beam with the fire of the Great Ocean.

+Weapon release only on my mark,+ he sent. +Solution Ignis three-nine-six, if you please.+

+*We can hit them now!*+ sent Tolbek, and Ignis winced at the blunt forcefulness of his brother's urge to shoot.

+On my mark only.+

+*We're sliding out of our angle of deflection!*+

+On my mark only.+

+*Ignis, in the name of–*+

+Mark.+

A searing, cerulean beam of light stabbed from the *Khemet*'s prow and carved the topside of Kamiti Sona like a butcher removing a layer of fat from a carcass. Silent explosions marched across the exposed underbelly of flensed hull-plates as

they peeled back. The Great Ocean flooded within as aetheric discharge exploded into space like *Mechanicum Borealis* over a rad-soaked forge world.

Ignis smiled, his fingers steepled before him.

+Lord Ahriman?+ he sent to the embarkation deck.

+*Is it done?*+

+As promised,+ said Ignis. +You have your way in.+

Warning klaxons blared. Emergency lights strobed as fresh impacts rocked the prison. A powerful charge filled Kamiti Sona, as if some vital element of atmospheric composition had been forcefully restored. Its inmates stood blinking and amazed, drawing in great lungfuls of potency, staring at the world through newly unveiled eyes.

Lemuel felt a growing clarity as the environment *changed,* becoming more tactile and real with every breath. The collar around his neck was smoking as though plucked from a furnace, but its touch was icy and pale patterns of frost webbed its surfaces.

'What happened?' he said as the chamber fell into anarchy.

'Nothing good,' said Camille, dragging him and Chaiya to the relative safety of projecting stone steps. 'We need to keep out of the way.'

No sooner had she spoken than a pack of servo-skulls fitted with underslung lascarbines and shock-calipers zipped through the air towards them.

'Get down!' she yelled.

Lemuel threw himself flat next to Chaiya.

A blizzard of las-fire burned the air. He looked over his shoulder. A group of inmates were screaming. Las-burn set their smocks ablaze and they flailed like madmen until pain overcame them. One man remained standing, oblivious to the killing flames consuming him. He laughed and hurled the fire back at the skulls in a blazing stream that shattered them into bony splinters.

A dozen more fixed on the burning man and he vanished in a storm of liqnite and electro-flame until his screaming laughter was abruptly ended.

Hard bangs Lemuel recognised as bolter-fire added to the deafening cacophony. Forking blasts of what looked like horizontal lightning flashed from somewhere above them. Inchoate laughter echoed in his skull. He tasted blood and sour bile, the sensation of biting on metal.

The collar was painfully cold around his neck. Frost flaked from it like cinders and drifted in curious spirals.

'Stay together,' said Chaiya, pressed tight to the steps and her eyes tight shut as she held Camille. 'Together, yes, that's Prospero's way.'

Prospero?

Lemuel gasped as the name lodged in his mind like a knife in the ribs. His body shuddered as he saw a dreaming city of white marble, tree-lined boulevards

and the scent of far-off lands carried over the open ocean.

Tears welled in his eyes for no reason he could articulate.

'Tizca?' he said, remembering the sight of the city from the air as he left, believing he would never see it again, yet knowing, with improbable certainty, that he would.

'What was that?' asked Chaiya, her dark eyes swimming with memory. 'Say it again.'

'Tizca,' said Lemuel. 'We were there, weren't we?'

'Yes, Lemuel, yes! You're right, we were,' said Chaiya, tears streaming down her gaunt cheeks. 'It… it is my home…? I live there!'

'No, Throne, no…' said Lemuel as snatches of things overheard while he bled and sweated in earthen pits that reeked of wild animals returned to him. 'Tizca's gone… The Wolves, they burned it… to get to… *Magnus.*'

All three of them flinched as the name left his lips, its syllables a key that unlocked a yammering host of competing memories. None of them could speak, too overwhelmed by the flood of painful thoughts of things lost and things endured.

Acrid vapours stung Lemuel's eyes and the smell of roasting meat made his mouth hatefully moist. Las-fire and streams of promethium scorched the air, and fatty smoke billowed from living pyres. Despite the flames, the air felt blisteringly cold in Lemuel's lungs.

Newly empowered, the inmates of Kamiti Sona gave free rein to their abilities. Nightmares clawed the air and hurricane winds twisted smoke into chattering spectres with sharp teeth and pitiless eyes. Mortal bodies swelled with power, becoming monstrous and insane. Flesh warped and minds cracked as immaterial vampyres claimed eager victims and remade possessed flesh in their own image. Hurricanes of psychic energy roared like dark laughter and muttering shadows dragged men and women into the walls and floor.

Warriors armoured in bronze and with plumes of red and white marched undaunted into the madness. They were moments of stillness within the storms of unleashed witchery, but they were few. Hunting in ad hoc squads, the warriors' shoulder-locked weapons executed with every trigger pull.

'They're killing everyone,' wept Chaiya.

Hundreds of prisoners crawled through pools of blood to find safety or hunkered down behind shredded barricades of the dead. Lemuel saw Medea and her son wrapped in each other's arms, a squad of the Silent Sisters armed with flamers advancing towards them.

'We have to help them,' said Camille.

'Don't be an idiot, Camille,' cried Lemuel, grabbing her wrist and pulling her back. 'Do you want to get killed?'

She fought him, but fear for her life gave Lemuel strength.

‘You can’t let them die!’

‘Better them than you,’ said Lemuel, horrified and ashamed that he meant every word. The depth of disappointment in Camille’s eyes cut to the heart of him. She released the fabric of his smock in her fist and recoiled, clutching her hand as though burned. She cried out, eyes wide in horror and misted with visions only she could see.

‘Are you hurt?’ screamed Chaiya. ‘Did they hit you?’

Camille shook her head, staring at Lemuel as if seeing him for the first time and being repulsed by what was revealed.

‘What is it?’ he said.

‘He slit the throats of innocents and drank their blood,’ said Camille. ‘He murdered seers to steal what they saw.’

‘What? No!’ cried Lemuel. ‘I didn’t!’

‘Not you,’ wept Camille. ‘The last man…’

‘What last man?’

‘Who wore that smock before you,’ she said.

‘How can you know that?’ he asked, but as soon as he asked the question, he knew. The frosted collar around his neck shattered into blackened fragments of ice.

And the fog deadening his thoughts these last five years blew out in the face of inrushing psychic energy.

He knew *exactly* how Camille could know that.

Psychometry, the power to know the history of an object through touch alone. Just as he knew that Chaiya was a low-level telepath and that they had first met on Prospero, when he’d come to tell Camille a psychic predator had laid its eggs in her skull.

Just as he knew he was a reader of auras, a diviner of truths who had been taught to harness that power by…

A roar of ear-bursting war-horns buckled the air and Lemuel felt the abrasive presence of vast, bellicose auras wedded to predatory machine souls. They were pushing the towering gates at the far end of the chamber open, and they would kill everything before them in a storm of fire and fury.

‘Got to get off the main floor,’ said Lemuel as the gate opened yet farther. ‘Got to get back to our cells.’

Camille nodded, gasping for breath and keeping her fingers laced together for fear of touching anything else. The horrors of this place were myriad and she had no wish for even the least of them to touch her.

‘Come on,’ said Lemuel, easing around the bottom of the stone steps. Fused bodies, melded, bent and elongated by means mortal anatomy was never meant to

employ, lay twisted at their base. He crawled over undulant flesh that bubbled with suckered mouths and blinking eyes. He wept as he climbed, keeping Kallista's ashes held in the crook of his arm.

They climbed from the madness and the screams, away from the gunshots, the storms of lightning and cackling monsters guised in human meat. Lemuel reached an upper landing when a dreadful sense of premonition made him look back into the chaos below.

Standing at the epicentre of the bloodshed and surrounded by a ring of howling warp lunatics was Prinn, miraculously untouched save by his own hand. Wild-eyed, he clawed his skin with bloodied fingernails, the king of the madmen.

'They're here!' he screamed with wild exultation. 'Please take me! I've done all you asked! I'm one of you now!'

And, finally, Prinn's pleas were answered.

With each lacerated strip of skin he tore away, sick light poured out, his inner workings radiant and blood divine.

The change working upon him intensified, skin, arteries and muscle unravelling like fraying thread. Organs burst and blood aerosolised around the man, coagulating and orbiting his flesh in a grotesque scarlet orrery. Prinn's form was lost in the maelstrom of his unmaking, yet his screams went undiminished.

The red mist of his remains hung in a veil.

Hulking shapes moved within.

Lemuel's bowels clenched as a warrior stepped through what Prinn's death had wrought, an angel of death plated in gleaming crimson and bloodied ivory.

A legionary, and behind him many more.

They spread out, wet with Prinn's transformation. Every one of them was radiant, haloed by a blazing aura of infinite complexity.

The warrior leading them burned brightest of all.

'*Ahzek…?*'

TEN

Unleashed
Inconceivable
Unthinkable

Ahriman knew this place.

He had never before set foot on Kamiti Sona. Its name was unknown to him, as was its very existence. And yet he knew it as soon as he emerged from the *porta rubrum* Hathor Maat had opened through the blazing siren-seer.

An inhuman gaol, aether-hostile and cold. A place unknown to him, but awash with pain and guilt. And a singular hatred.

'Yes,' he said. '*This* is where they would take Kallimakus.'

Ahriman tasted the blood coating his armour, the sum of a life wasted filling him in an instant.

Luděk Prinn. A mortal whose soul-fire could never be entirely hidden from those with eyes to see it, not even by a hateful place like this.

What might a mind like his have achieved with the proper tutelage? What glories could he have known? No one would ever know, his potential wasted by an Imperium that feared and persecuted that which it did not understand. Ahriman grieved for Prinn's lost potential even as he felt the man's soul torn apart by the Great Ocean's predators.

Then Prinn was gone, and the furious battle raging around Ahriman surged into his awareness. Gunshots and screams. Fire and madness. Warp phantoms scratched at the wards vouchsafing his auto-senses, crackling though his visor with gibbering voices and static. Everywhere Ahriman looked, he saw the madness of unchecked aether powers, the inmates like lunatic children let loose in an armoury.

Shimmering bodies hung suspended in the air, incandescent with fire as their powers consumed them. Flaming skulls flew with las-bolts and lightning blazing from underslung weapons. Tar-black smoke coiled obscenely and storms of lightning forked from the outstretched hands of mass murderers.

A mirror-faced man knelt in a pool of his own glistening viscera as a hurricane of dust pulled him apart organ by organ, limb by limb.

Then Ahriman nodded. 'I saw this place in the ruins of the Pyramid of Photep,' he said, one hand on the *Book of Magnus.* Scarab Occult marched from the red

mist, polearms lowered, blades leaping with white flame. Their leader, Onuris Hex, known as the Sky Bearer, gave Ahriman a caustic stare.

'*This* is where we will find a shard of the Crimson King?'

'The primarch has led us here.'

'How do we find it?' demanded Hex, turning to unleash a blazing spear of fire from his polearm. It incinerated a pack of inmates with bodies twisted into scaled, ape-like monsters.

'I do not know for certain, but finding Mahavastu Kallimakus will be a good start.'

Hex gave him another of the withering looks that had given rise to a moniker only ever whispered behind his back.

'The primarch's scribe? He is here?'

'I believe so.'

'You *believe* so? That's what you brought us here with?'

'We are here because Magnus' soul *wants* to be whole again,' said Ahriman as more of the Thousand Sons passed through the porta rubrum: the Feathered Ones of Nycteus, the Sun Scarabs of Kiu and the Ankharu Blades of Memunim. Bolters immediately locked into fire sectors, and disciplined volleys cleared the immediate space around the Thousand Sons.

Menkaura came through with Sanakht and Lucius. The Emperor's Children swordsman had kept himself in seclusion for most of the voyage, but his aura was profoundly altered – resplendent and, if such a thing were possible, more arrogant than before. He and Sanakht flanked the tattoo-cut form of Aforgomon, and the bound daemon's aura shimmered in delight.

'Such wonders worked before us,' it said.

Real space groaned at the seams as the Great Ocean made sport of the malleable flesh within.

'This place is going to tear itself apart,' said Memunim, his cult warriors forming a sacred mandala around him. More volleys of bolter-fire kept maddened inmates at bay.

'Let it,' said Kiu. 'You all felt what this place was, what our enemies did here. The sooner it is in ruins the better.'

'We find what we came for and kill everything else,' said Memunim. 'Ahriman?'

Ahriman pressed a hand to the *Book of Magnus*. Its power was unimaginable, each precise scratch of ink on its pages significant and potent. The soul-shard *was* here. He could feel his father's presence like a hesitant ghost, a fleetingly glimpsed impression scratching at the corner of the eye.

'Where are you?' he whispered. 'Show me…'

The power in the book needed no other invitation. Ahriman's awareness exploded through the structure of Kamiti Sona. He felt every hurt, every wrong, every humiliation and every pain. He felt old souls and new, the blind, the mad. Souls unknown and souls he knew…

Ahriman's gaze snapped to an upper gallery, where three figures – a man and two women – were climbing out of the chaos. They bore the mark of Prospero, a boon all travellers to its once fair shores took away with them. The man leading looked back, and recognition hit Ahriman like a blow.

'*Lemuel…?*'

Two giants were adrift in the void.

Like the first spacewalkers, they moved with gelid grace, but these were no soft-bodied mortals encased in life-sustaining suits of absurd fragility.

A Reaver and a Warhound, god-engines whose princeps were now indivisible from the machinery within. Insane sentiences from the worst nightmares of the earliest pioneers of thinking machines. Once loyalist war machines of Tempestus, now servants of much darker masters.

Hercules Furens and *Zalgolyssa* crossed the darkness towards Kamiti Sona, guided by kine-choirs of Raptora aboard the *Khemet.* In their wake came a makeshift flotilla of pressurised fuel tanks, boxy cargo containers and anything that could be sealed from the hard vacuum.

They arced towards the vast breach torn in the prison's topside on trajectories mapped by the Order of Ruin.

The Warhound *Hercules Furens* landed first, slamming down on buckled deck-plates at Kamiti Sona's midsection. The much heavier *Zalgolyssa* landed moments later, its splay-clawed legs flexing and war-horn growling. The Warhound immediately stalked into the depths of the prison without pause, like a hunting beast scenting blood for its more deadly kin.

This section had explosively decompressed, but the Pavoni adepts had rendered its atmospheric composition breathable.

Not for the Titans' benefit, but the following forces.

With the Titans on the hunt, the first of the cargo containers slammed into the breach. They skidded through the spinning morass of debris before magnetic clamps secured them to deck-plates and retrofitted support stanchions.

Explosive bolts dropped the sealed sides of the containers, and the dregs of the Planet of the Sorcerers poured out: packs of slavering beasts herded from the toppled menhir city and bloodsworn renegades beyond all hope of redemption.

The *Khemet'*s lance fire had been precisely calibrated to not interfere with Kamiti Sona's spin, and thus its artificial gravity was unaffected by the vast opening in its hull.

The breach point selected by Ignis was precisely three point six kilometres from Ahriman and his cabal, a strike to capture the orbital's embarkation facilities.

Or so it appeared.

'Dorsal manoeuvring array, three second burst, starboard prow array, seventy degree down angle,' said Ignis. 'Bring us up over the breach. I want those ships bracketed.'

Data streams cascaded down the glyph columns, too fast for even the augmented thralls to process. Though crewing a starship was usually a mortal task, Athanaean legionaries on the bridge streamed the information to him at the speed of thought. Ignis spread his consciousness between enumerations to parse each variable instantaneously.

Space around the orbital gaol burned with warhead detonations and burning atomic vortices. Ghost images of the combatants flickered in the e-mag distortion. Glittering ablation cascades sparkled like diamond dust and ordnance tracks of frozen exhaust contrails snaked through the void like silver thread.

The mathematical beauty of it all made Ignis want to weep.

'Portside battery to fire in five seconds,' said Ignis. 'Six volleys of void shredders. Two of hull penetrators.'

He switched to thought form.

+Tolbek, prow lance to fire on my mark, solution Ignis nine-five-eight.+

+*What am I firing at?*+ asked Tolbek.

+The second ship, the corvette.+

+*What corvette?*+

Ignis sighed. So much easier to work with adepts from the Order of Ruin.

+Quadrant eleven, you feeble–'+

Ignis felt a jolt of shock as he looked back to the oculus bay. Tracking enemy movements within a volatile engagement volume was a discipline all of its own, and his treatises on tactical combat responses and meta-decision-making had never yet failed to exactly predict enemy movements in a void battle.

Until now.

A series of punishing impacts raked the *Khemet* from prow to stern. The control obelisks flared with critical damage glyphs and the oculus bay flared as the voids blew out. Servitors and thralls cried as repercussive feedback seared the insides of their skulls black.

'Inconceivable,' said Ignis, admiration warring with disbelief at this enemy's virtuosity. To have blindsided an adept of Ruin was a feat of misdirection worthy of the greatest void-warriors of the Legions.

The *Khemet* had been blind to the corvette's presence, its shields somehow reflecting any detectable emissions inwards and rendering it all but invisible.

Only its firing had unmasked it.

In the moments he had left, Ignis cast his mind over the gulf of space, seeking to know the mind at the helm of the vessel that had killed them.

Thoughts swathed in night, trained to find shadows where none existed. A practitioner of the artes.

'Nineteenth Legion,' said Ignis, knowing what must come next: relentless, unending broadsides unleashed by highly disciplined gun crews.

As if on cue, multiple torpedo impacts slammed into the *Khemet*'s ventral armour. Deep-penetrating warheads punched into the frigate's guts before detonating in firestorms of atomic light.

Disembowelling strikes.

Ship killers.

'Stop!' ordered Sister Caesaria, stepping away from the giant gate, one hand pressed to the vox-bead in her ear. 'Seal the door. Seal it now!'

The Warhounds growled in anger at this reversal, but halted their efforts to open the gate. They hauled the berthing chains taut in enormous fists. A cold sensation of *wrongness* travelled Promus' spine at the thought of the gate sealing.

'Wait, what are you doing?' said Nagasena. 'We need to get in there immediately.'

Caesaria shot him a hostile glare.

'Kamiti Sona is under attack,' she said. 'Our embarkation decks are swarming with beasts and traitors. The enemy brings battle-engines and these ones are needed to fight them.'

'Open the gate first,' said Promus. 'Then send them.'

'There is no time and my order is final.'

'The boarding action is a feint,' said Bjarki, his eyes frosted with cloud. 'The scent of maleficarum lies within.'

'What else do you expect within a psykana-gaol?' sneered Caesaria, but Bjarki shook his head.

'I know the spoor of Prospero's maleficarum,' he said, his voice a low, animal growl. 'Now open the *andskoti* door before I *make* you open it!'

Caesaria's fellow Sisters bristled at the naked threat in Bjarki's words, and the Kastelans' weapon arms spooled up to fire on the word of their mistress.

'You do not command here, *Wolf,*' she said.

'He does not,' agreed Nagasena, with a deep bow of respect to Caesaria, 'but nor is he wrong. The prisoners we came for are within. The enemy knows this and seeks to draw us away.'

Caesaria considered Nagasena's words and nodded.

'Very well,' she said, 'but I can spare no warriors save for those already within.'

Bjarki laughed. It was a low, wet growl.

'Fear not,' he said. 'We know how to destroy maleficarum.'

Breathless and shocked, Lemuel staggered onto the chamber's upper level. The steps were in the centre of this gallery of cells, and fifty dark doorways stretched both left and right.

Lemuel sank to his knees as fear gripped his limbs with paralysing intensity. He put his face in his hands. His heart was hammering too fast and too loud, like gunshots right by his ear. He tried to shut out the awful sounds coming from below – howling nightmare beasts in stolen flesh, the manic laughter of madmen and sickening noise of people being devoured by monsters.

'Come on!' shouted Camille as strobing firelight reflected from the smooth walls of stone. 'Get up!'

'Why is he here?' sobbed Lemuel. 'What does it mean?'

His entire body was shaking. Ahzek Ahriman was here!

Were they never to know peace from the Thousand Sons?

Chaiya knelt beside him. 'I don't know,' she said, and Lemuel wasn't sure what she was answering – the questions he'd asked or the one he'd *thought.*

She pressed her hand to the back of his neck and gently squeezed. Almost immediately, Lemuel's panic eased and he took a juddering breath of hot, greasy-tasting air.

'It doesn't mean anything,' said Camille, standing over him with her hands on her hips. 'It's just coincidence.'

Lemuel shook his head. 'There are no coincidences. *He* taught me that. It was one of his first lessons.'

'You think he's here for us?'

'I don't know, but I don't want to find out.'

'Then let's get moving.'

'Where can we go?' snapped Lemuel.

'Anywhere but here,' said Chaiya, looking over his shoulder in terror. This time he let her help him to his feet and turned to see what she had seen.

Figures in blood-soaked prison smocks were racing up the steps. They paused in their ascent and lifted their heads as if hunting a scent. Lemuel's stomach lurched in horror at their hideously disfigured faces.

Ragged flaps of torn-off flesh hung from bloodied skulls, peeled away by clawed fingernails. Blind faces wet with glutinous tears. Ruptured sacs of gouged eyes.

A word Ahriman had once let slip returned to him: *daemon.*

'Go,' he whispered, and they set off down the gallery, all the while knowing there was nowhere to hide. Camille ducked inside a cell towards the end of the gallery. Lemuel and Chaiya followed her, skidding to a halt.

They were not the cell's only occupants.

Hunched in the corner on a filthy mattress were Medea and Pheres. Relief made mother and son go limp at the sight of them, until the natural hostility Kamiti Sona bred in every inmate hardened Medea's face to granite.

'Get out!' cried Pheres. 'The monsters will follow you and they'll kill us.'

Lemuel heard the wet, animal sounds of the mutilated inmates behind them and shook his head.

'No time,' he said. 'We've nowhere left to go.'

'Get out!' cried the boy, before burying his face in his mother's neck. Lemuel met Medea's gaze, her face a ruin of tears and regret.

'Please don't,' she said. 'He's all I have. I forgave him.'

Lemuel didn't know what she meant, so didn't reply.

Camille and Chaiya crouched in the corner next to Medea and Pheres. Sounds of the faceless, eyeless creatures pursuing them came from farther back along the corridor, like the grunts of swine with their snouts pressed in loamy earth.

Panic filled Lemuel's belly with sour bile, but as he listened to Camille and Chaiya speak comforting words to one another, he saw the naked fear in their auras diminish.

Lemuel knelt beside them and took both women's hands as fresh memories bubbled to the surface. One of the first lessons Ahriman had taught him concerned the forces inimical to life that dwelled within the Great Ocean. How they fed, what drew them.

And how they hunted.

'They're coming to kill us,' said Lemuel. 'But if you listen to me, they might not find us.'

'How?' said Chaiya.

'They don't have eyes,' said Lemuel, the words spilling out of him in a rush. 'They don't need them. I think they sense our fear, the… dark light in our auras… I think he said it draws them like blood in the water. If we can control that fear, they might not find us.'

'Sorry to spoil your plan, Lem,' said Camille, 'but I don't think I'm going to get any less terrified.'

'You don't have to,' said Lemuel as the sound of bare footsteps slapping on stone approached. 'Remember what I can do? My power? Remember the guard at Tizca's docks, how I made him doubt the *Selene*'s manifest to let us all aboard?'

'Yes,' said Chaiya. 'I remember! You can do this.'

'You can keep the monsters away?' said Medea.

He nodded. 'Yes. Maybe. I don't know. I'm going to try.'

Lemuel took a deep breath. His memories of Ahriman's tutelage were still fragmentary and only slowly reassembling within his mind, but his skill with

auras had been with him all his life. All Ahriman had done was provide focus.

He pushed his mind into a higher mode of… *enumerations?*

And in the blink of an eye, it was like being made whole again, like breaking the surface of a stagnant lake or breathing unpolluted air at the topmost spire of a hive.

It felt wondrous, seeing the ebb and flow of emotion through others. Lemuel saw the azure and purple of Camille's brazen courage – a shield against the ochre yellow of her fears and insecurities – interwoven with Chaiya's warm umber of maternal instincts that only ever sought to protect those around her.

Working against that were Medea and Pheres' auras.

The bilious green of old resentment at being forced to bear away a cursed child, black bitterness at the unfairness of a cosmos that cared nothing for the wants of the mortals who dwelled within it. His hands moved over them like a mountebank faith-healer at work, drawing courage from Camille and the urge to protect from Chaiya.

He wove it around them and saw the tension in their faces ease. And with that ease the fear became more manageable as it drained like water spiralling away into a sluice.

Lemuel heard grunting, bovine sounds and knew the killers were at the door. He slowly turned his head, biting his lip to keep from crying out in revulsion.

Two of the eyeless, rip-faced monsters stood in the opening to the cell, hunched over, bloodied teeth chattering and flensed skulls twitching from side to side. Their inmate smocks were stained black, as if something toxic were seeping from within their possessed flesh. They mewled in confusion, like spoiled children denied something sweet.

Lemuel held his breath as one of them stepped into the cell.

Its mutilated skull swayed from side to side as it drew nearer. Ropes of black saliva drooled from its ravaged mouth.

A suckered tongue slid from a lipless mouth.

It tasted the air for fear, but found nothing.

The creature hissed in frustration and turned its back.

Lemuel let out a silent exhalation.

Then Pheres began to cry.

The monster in the doorway stopped.

And Lemuel did the only thing he could to save them.

Fire and nightmares lashed the Imperial warriors.

Immaterial energies burned in every breath and corposant flared from every scream of a thread cut.

Flickering witch-fire leapt from madman to madman in the unnatural darkness. Horned silhouettes danced and skeletal shadows clawed out of the walls.

Four Vorax were smouldering wreckage. Two fallen Ursarax lay in pools of an oil-blood mix that stank of mortuary fluids.

The inmates of Kamiti Sona were powerful, yes, but they were untrained – without discipline, without unity.

Lambs to the slaughterman's blade.

Promus rammed his skull-topped staff into the chest of a man whose eyes were afire. Ribs and spine shattered. Shock trauma pulped internal organs. A psychic pulse destroyed the warp-thing within. Its scream blackened the metal of Promus' vambrace, scorching out a protective sigil inscribed by Ptolemy himself in a brighter age.

Hundreds of inmates with cindered skin and magma veins pressed them, fighting to escape the tempest-filled chamber as the legionaries fought to enter. They screamed with inhuman bloodlust, vessels for puppeting entities of atavistic hunger and insatiable soul-thirst.

None of the mortals wore the faces of those Nagasena sought: a stocky man and slender woman with equatorial-dark skin, a second woman with soft features and heterochromic eyes.

Promus dropped a dozen with head shots. Caustic blood sprayed. He went in hard against the others, shoulder low, staff splitting bodies left and right. Making space. He flowed into those spaces, killing and making yet more space. He fought five steps ahead, as though he had run a thousand theoreticals of this moment in the sparring cages.

The Wolves fought alongside him, plunging deeper into the mob of warp-touched prisoners. Bjarki was primal fury and elemental savagery, unleashing storms of ice shards, ash-black avatars of ancient wolves and winter lightning that struck wherever his bale-eye fell.

Svafnir Rackwulf protected his left, hewing limbs with what looked like a harpoon with a long, serrated blade. Just looking at the glitter-sheened edges of the null-blade made Promus want to snap its haft across his knee.

Widdowsyn fought to Bjarki's right, a crackling buckler serving in defence of the Rune Priest. Harr Balegyr and Gierlothnir Helblind ranged farther afield as lone wolves, killing with berserk abandon and hearth-songs of the Aett on their lips.

Though he was without psy-craft, Yasu Nagasena fought shoulder to shoulder with the legionaries, a dangerous place for most mortals, but the seer-hunter's reflexes were swift enough to keep him safe.

Behind Nagasena, Vindicatrix directed the lethal predations of the Vorax automata as they slaughtered mortals with distasteful relish. Credence Araxe's Ursarax thralls hunted in an opportunistic pack, launching themselves through the

air and overwhelming those they fell upon with all the homicidal fury of their deranged master.

Promus fell to one knee, unleashing a war-cry of the XIII Legion that exploded in a ring of cobalt-blue fire. Two score screaming lunatics burned to fang-mawed ghosts where they stood, but a shrieking witch covered in tattoos of snakes that writhed beneath her branded skin remained standing.

She carried sharpened femur-daggers and her arms were bloody to the elbow. Dripping red skulls circled her, ragged stumps of spinal cord dangling from where she had hacked them free.

Promus stood, made a quarter-turn and fired a head shot.

One of her pack skulls intercepted his bolt and exploded in fragments of bone and grey meat. The rest came on like attack dogs. A second bolt took down another before the rest were upon Promus, snapping and tearing with jawbones that morphed into bestial, fanged things.

They were irritants, nothing more, and thoughts of fire detonated them one by one. Steaming brain matter misted the air as Promus aimed his pistol at the woman again.

'Why do you kill your own kind?' she shrieked.

Pity had briefly touched Promus upon entry to this shadow-haunted chamber of madness, but the sight of fallen Sisters' desecrated corpses had hardened him to thoughts of mercy.

'You are not my kind,' he said.

'I wasn't talking about me,' she cackled.

Promus fired a custom-load mass-reactive, its chemical explosive mixed with noble elements known to be inimical to the warp-touched. The witch's torso disintegrated, but her words cut into his soul.

An avian shadow of impenetrable darkness that yet glittered with myriad painful colours billowed from the witch's falling corpse. Its wings were feathered and it screeched in fury, swelling and growing with every breath. A hooked, crocodilian beak formed, a skull garlanded with crushed dreams.

A dark lord of the empyrean.

Promus unleashed a torrent of psychic fury from his staff, but the creature drew the fire into its body. It pinned him with eyes that were suns illuminating dead galaxies, a mind weaving plots that would not bear fruit for ten thousand years. It uncoiled a fist of serpentine fingers and irresistible kine power wrenched Promus' staff from his grip.

'No!' he cried as the beast crushed it to splinters.

His battleplate smoked as the wards woven into it blistered and burned away. Promus fought to break its gaze, to keep it out of his mind, but its barbed thoughts

easily prised open the vault of his skull. It whispered within him, a name and a curse all in one.

Death to you, and all your kin.

It laughed at what it found within him, turning and lifting its head to whisper that secret knowledge onwards.

His mind was buckling at the seams when two saviours in frost-grey armour appeared at his side. Bjarki kicked Promus in the back, breaking the warp-thing's gaze. He fell forwards, cracking his skull on the stone floor.

Through a haze of blood, he saw Svafnir Rackwulf bend and cast his serrated harpoon like Tashtego of Old Earth upon sight of his albino prey. Its long, toothed blade flew true and struck the winged monster square in the chest.

It vanished in a screeching explosion of blinding light and sound, utterly undone by Rackwulf's null-weapon. Bjarki hauled Promus upright as painful after-images of the monster refused to fade from his retinas.

'I told you we knew how to destroy maleficarum,' he said.

Promus nodded, his mouth tasting of ashes and bile. He blinked away nightmarish visions of corpses of dead worlds with sores that were once cities, razed by charnel winds that brushed pallid stars and snuffed them out one by one.

The unnatural darkness of the chamber lifted, and Promus looked up to its far reaches. Black smoke twisted like a nest of oily serpents lairing in the roof vault. It wreathed the chamber's upper reaches in shadow, but Promus saw figures moving along the upper galleries: transhuman warriors in crimson plate, burning with warp-light.

'There…' he gasped, struggling to raise his arm.

Bjarki looked up and stiffened, a wolf with its hackles raised. The purity of his savage hatred was palpable.

'I *see* you,' he snarled.

The Sun Scarabs went right, leaving Nycteus and the Feathered Ones to guard the steps from anything that might climb from the bloodshed and chaos below. The Scarab Occult and Memunim's Ankharu Blades followed Ahriman left.

They moved at speed, clearing every cell and moving down the gallery in overwatching bounds. The Terminators filled each cell with fire as the Raptora sealed them with kine barriers. They left smoking tombs in their wake, billowing the roasted flesh-stink of psyker corpses.

Eyeless feasters skulked in the upper gallery, devouring the souls their rudimentary fear-sense sniffed out of the morass of raw emotion. They squatted over bodies torn open by bare hands. Gleaming entrails hung from dripping jaws.

Ahriman kept his pistol holstered, killing the cannibalistic monsters with sharp jabs of focused kine power, like ice picks to the frontal lobe.

‘You are certain it was your former pupil?’ said Menkaura, stepping over the caved-in faces of flesh-eaters.

‘Yes, it was Lemuel,’ replied Ahriman. ‘He is close.’

‘And still alive?’

Ahriman nodded.

‘Surprising,’ said Menkaura, staff in one hand, an ornamented pistol with a conical snout in the other. He fired a blue-hot beam of plasma into the chest of a chatter-toothed cannibal. It vanished in a plume of superheated fire, toppling from the gallery, ablaze from head to feet.

‘Did you teach this Lemuel battle-artes? Warding circles?’

‘No.’

‘*Very* surprising,’ said Menkaura, pressing his back to the wall as an explosion of fire boiled from the cell next to him.

Ahriman did not reply, keeping one hand pressed to the *Book of Magnus.* The tremors of anticipation rippled the pages between its bindings. His own sense of what they would find here was no less dynamic.

‘You really believe *he* will be here as well?’ asked Menkaura, nodding towards the book. ‘Kallimakus?’

‘Yes,’ said Ahriman. ‘It makes perfect sense the primarch would maintain a connection between himself and the scribe who penned his greatest work.’

‘Don’t you find it even a little strange the Silent Sisterhood have not sensed the soul-shard Kallimakus might carry within him?’ said Aforgomon, trailing behind Ahriman.

‘I would expect the greatest cunning from my primarch,’ said Ahriman. ‘Even split from himself.’

In truth, he had wondered the same thing, though was loath to reveal that doubt to the daemon within the yokai.

‘But you sense more than that, don’t you?’ said Aforgomon. ***‘A sleeping dragon, just waiting on the right song to wake it.’***

Ahriman held up a hand as they approached another cell. Trepidation caught in his throat.

‘In here,’ he said. ‘I go in alone.’

Ahriman spun and entered the cell, staff held before him as a weapon and means of defence.

The cell had five occupants – three female, two male.

He recognised two of them: Camille Shivani, a psychometrist of no small ability, and Lemuel Gaumon, his former neophyte. The third woman he did not know, but her bone structure told him she was a native of Prospero.

But no Mahavastu Kallimakus…

An older woman in the corner of the cell was weeping, her forearm locked tightly around the neck of a much younger male.

A son?

Whatever the relationship between them had been was now irrelevant. The boy was dead. Strangled by his own mother, by the reading of his swiftly diminishing aura.

Lemuel sat with his back to one wall of the cell, sobbing uncontrollably and with his knees drawn up to his chest, a metallic urn clutched guiltily close to his chest. Camille and her Prosperine companion knelt beside the weeping woman, their faces twisted in grief.

'What did he do, Chaiya?' screamed Camille, her hands balled to fists. 'Throne, Lem, what did you *do?*'

Lemuel didn't answer, but Ahriman saw the truth.

The clumsy marks of psychic manipulation were evident all across the weeping woman's aura. A lethal mix of old resentment and frustration towards her son, drawn out of the locked place to which it had been consigned before being crudely and massively amplified.

'He saved you,' said Ahriman.

The woman would not be parted from her dead son, but the Thousand Sons had no interest in her. They removed Lemuel, Camille and Chaiya from the cell, dragging them onto the gallery.

'Kallimakus?' said Menkaura.

'No,' said Ahriman, unable to conceal his disappointment, but before he could say more, the stabbing pain of a blurted psychic hail crashed into his thoughts. He felt the mind that had sent it, one of geometric configurations and Euclidean precision. The others heard it too, even the daemon.

+Ignis?+ he asked.

+*None other.*+

Ignis' voice echoed as if from across a vast chasm. Faint and distorted, but its urgency was beyond doubt.

+What is it?+

+*Lord Ahriman, there has been a… development.*+

+What sort of development?+ said Ahriman, a leaden sensation of dread settling in his gut. A sense of things ended before they had truly begun.

+*The* Khemet *is lost and its few survivors are now aboard Kamiti Sona. The enemy vessels are turning their guns on this facility and will destroy it rather than allow us to escape.*+

Ahriman hoped he had misheard, but knew he had not.

+Where are you?+

+On the breached upper embarkation decks, fighting to secure an alternate means of egress.+

+What means of egress?+

+One you will not like. Just rendezvous on our location as soon as you can. I am sending you some assistance,+ said Ignis, breaking the connection, but not before Ahriman had a glimpse of somewhere void-dark and hopeless, a screaming black tomb of lost souls.

'Incoming,' called Nycteus from the top of the steps.

Ahriman swore. Could things get any worse?

Before he could curse the stupidity of even thinking such a foolish question, he felt the feral touch of icy souls.

'Wolves,' he said.

ELEVEN

Unto the ice
A broken blade
I have you

Nagasena had seen legionaries in action before, of course, but was still awed at the inhuman swiftness of Bjarki and his warriors. He followed them up the steps as fast as he could, but the men of ice pulled ahead with every breath.

The Space Wolves raced to the uppermost gallery like the death-runners of Terra, crazed augmented men and women who defied reason and gravity to leap across the gnarled architecture atop soaring hive-spires for the over-stimulation of their neural implants.

Harr Balegyr set a berserker's pace, howling with wild fury. Bjarki vaulted upwards as though his limbs were coiled springs. Svafnir Rackwulf and Olgyr Widdowsyn flanked Bjarki, and not even the hunter's long-toothed spear hampered his rapid ascent. Only Helblind with his half-iron, half-flesh body consented to match Nagasena's speed.

The Wolves fired as they climbed, bursts that chewed the stone of the upper parapet to rubble. Red-armoured shapes returned fire amid booming detonations, their shots displacing air with the distinctive hard bangs of Legion weapons.

A mass-reactive struck the stone beside Nagasena. The explosion slammed him to the side, forcing air from his lungs. He lost his grip on *Shoujiki* and rolled, fighting for breath as searing heat burned his chest.

Machine-like hands of dark steel hauled him upright.

'Hold still,' said Gierlothnir Helblind, sweeping up Nagasena's fallen sword.

'Wait!' cried Nagasena.

Shoujiki's blade cut swiftly, slicing through the leather straps securing Nagasena's breastplate. Smoking shrapnel had ripped the lacquered blend of ceramite and kinetic ablatives to fibrous shreds. Helblind handed the sword back to Nagasena with a disdainful glance at his ruined armour.

'Hardly worth bothering with. You should stay here. Another shot like that will cut your thread.'

'I will take my chances,' snapped Nagasena.

Helblind shrugged. 'It's your life.'

The legionary turned and set off once again.

Helblind's advice was good, but Nagasena had orders to secure these three prisoners alive. And being caught between warring legionaries was just about the worst place for mortals to find themselves.

Nagasena followed Helblind as a howling wind roared down from above. He looked up in time to see a raging blizzard envelop the upper reaches of the chamber. Shadowed shapes moved in the freezing mist, coming together in a thunder of Legion plate.

Purple lightning flared and charcoal-dark lupine ghosts howled. More gunfire and clashing steel. Grunts and the shriek of metal on metal. Nagasena sprinted up the steps, taking them three at a time and looping around each dog-legged landing. A crust of frost coated every surface. He skidded on patches of ice, only reluctantly slowing his pace.

Nagasena rounded the last turn in the steps and drew his silver-chased volkite pistol, a weapon more than capable of killing a legionary. A weapon he had last drawn in anger against a Luna Wolf who now served the Emperor once more.

His mouth was awash with a bilious, sour-milk taste. They'd hoped Kamiti Sona's alien configuration would deny their foes the use of their powers, but fate had decided otherwise.

Corposant clung to the walls and splintered ruin of the parapet. Glittering fog veiled the air, making him feel light-headed with every breath he took.

Flesh debris lay scattered across the wide gallery, too violently to tell the number of bodies. Nagasena saw limbs with snapped bone splinters jutting from torn stumps of shoulder, cloven helmets with pulped brains and bright blood spilling out, mounds of stamped-on intestine and broken shards of armour ripped open with bare hands.

Despite the catastrophic amounts of reeking, chem-rich blood, none of the body parts appeared to belong to the legionaries of the VI.

Legion war was like no other, cruel beyond the worst brutality mortals could ever inflict. But the savagery of Fenris made Nagasena feel sullied, as though he'd knowingly bartered a measure of his soul in counting them his allies.

Nagasena set off down the gallery of cells towards the sound of tribal oaths and crashing gunfire. Mass-reactives had transformed the once smooth wall into a cratered cliff face, and the ground was slippery with blood and melting ice.

He ran into the mist as enormous impacts shook the chamber, ringing booms like the pealing of a titanic bell that went on and on. He slipped and went down onto one knee.

The mist twitched and something flew right at him.

Nagasena threw himself flat as Olgyr Widdowsyn's broken shield slammed into the wall. It shivered, half its width embedded in the stone. For a moment

Nagasena felt nauseous as it seemed he could see *through* the shield to the wall beyond.

A clatter of plate was his only warning.

Three legionaries – two crimson, one frosty grey – spilled from the mist. Locked together in a flurry of bludgeoning fists, crunching elbows and battering knees, they slammed from the walls like angry bull grox. Knowing he was an insect at the feet of heedless giants, Nagasena threw himself into the nearest cell.

A pair of blackened bodies lay against its back wall, fused together by some ferocious, intolerable fire. Their eyes stared at Nagasena from cinder-flaked skulls, and he recoiled at the impossible accusation he saw there. He rubbed a hand over his face and when he looked again, their sockets were empty and black.

He pushed himself to his feet, pressing his back against the wall by the door. An animal roar echoed and a warrior in crimson flew into the cell. He crushed the corpses and immediately tried to rise.

Olgyr Widdowsyn crashed into the cell, which suddenly felt entirely too small. He hammered his leg at the Thousand Sons legionary's face. His boot went flat to the wall as the sorcerer's skull detonated in an explosion of blood and bone fragments.

He spun around, not quickly enough. The second Thousand Sons legionary entered the cell, his hand thrust forwards. Widdowsyn slammed into the wall, pinned there by invisible forces.

The Wolf howled, veins bulging as he fought the power locking his limbs in place.

The crimson-plated legionary took another step into the cell, his face fixed on Widdowsyn with such anger that it made Nagasena blanch. The sorcerer's bleeding skull was shaven in a widow's peak and his face was the mahogany of Nordafrik with a closely plaited osiriform beard. He swept his other hand to the side. Widdowsyn's breastplate ripped away, swiftly followed by his pauldrons and shoulder guards.

'I will cut out your heart,' the legionary said, taking another step and reaching for the curved khopesh knife belted at his hip. 'And you are going to watch every bloody cut through my eyes.'

Nagasena held his breath, fingers tightening on the leather-wound grip of *Shoujiki.* His focus narrowed, picturing the path his blade must take.

He let the Thousand Sons legionary take another step.

Nagasena made a quarter-turn, his sword rising then slashing down in a perfect *sayu men* strike.

The blade split the sorcerer's skull from crown to jawbone. Nagasena flexed his hands together in the *shibori,* an instant of flexion to slide his blade free. The

Thousand Sons legionary half turned, his one remaining eye filled with confusion and his mouth struggling to speak a valediction.

But his last words went unsaid as Olgyr Widdowsyn wrapped an arm around his throat and snapped his neck.

'You don't let them speak,' said the Wolf. 'Even in death.'

The blizzard stilled. Stone and ice fragments fell in a glittering rain. Memunim's few remaining Ankharu Blades finally overcame the Rune Priest's ferocity and raised the kine barrier between them. Sanakht and Lucius stood facing off against the wavering forms pacing on the other side. They rolled their shoulders, poised to fight again.

Ahriman felt the Fenrisian psyker's phenomenal power tearing at the barrier like a wild animal, drawing strength from his warriors in a way the Thousand Sons never could.

'Had circumstances been different, think what you might have learned from one another,' said Aforgomon. ***'Imagine it – the fury and power of Fenris alloyed to the discipline and craft of Prospero.'***

'Such a thing can never be,' said Ahriman.

The cut-skinned yokai shook its head. ***'I thought you knew better than to deal in absolutes, Ahzek?'***

'I once attempted such a rapprochement,' said Ahriman, elaborating only reluctantly. 'But some things, once put asunder, can never be reunited entirely.'

'If you will forgive the term, I pray you are wrong,' said Menkaura, nodding towards the terrified mortals behind Ahriman and Aforgomon. The daemon maintained a low-level kine shield around them, but the raptures were dissipating almost as soon as they formed for reasons Ahriman could not understand.

'Apologies, brother,' he said, crouching as the vaporised remains of a solid slug hissed against the metal of his shoulder guard. 'Fighting the Wolves again has brought my melancholic humour to the fore.'

'Strange,' said Menkaura.

'How so?'

'The choleric humour waxes strong in our brothers, yet I see the opposite in you.'

'The tides of the Great Ocean break differently upon each soul,' said Ahriman. 'And it breaks hard against this place, as though it seeks to destroy that which has kept it at bay for so long.'

'You attribute malice to a realm without sentience,' said Menkaura.

'Mere poetic license.'

'How naive you both are,' said Aforgomon, tapping a finger to its spiral-carved chest, where burned the black light of its essence. ***'Since the first rock***

was raised to cave in a skull, humanity has seeded the warp with malice and sentience in abundance.'

Ahriman resisted the urge to grab the daemon-yokai and hurl it from the gallery. It felt his hate and laughed, practically daring him to act.

Pencil-thin beams of volkite energy punched into the stonework overhead, and Ahriman shifted position as molten gobbets of rock dribbled from the impact points. He risked a glance towards the crumbling parapet where the Feathered Ones and the Sun Scarabs fought a host of iron-skinned foes: hook-limbed automata with bulbous, insectile skulls and flying cyberform warrior-thralls.

Short-life kine shields and pockets of superheated oxygen distorted the air like a desert mirage. Bolter shells, high-charge volkite beams and arcing forks of lightning blazed back and forth like a raging firefight between two hive-blocks.

Behind them, Onuris Hex and the Scarab Occult cut through the gallery floor with glowing kine-blades. Eleven of the Thousand Sons were dead, cut down in the initial violent spasms of contact or in the ongoing firefight. More would likely die before this venture was done.

'Anything from Ignis?' asked Menkaura.

'No.'

'Then we fight?' said Aforgomon.

'No, we escape.'

'You hold every advantage,' said the daemon. ***'Numbers and warp-craft. You can kill every living thing within this place and you know it.'***

'Maybe so,' said Ahriman, 'but do you imagine these mortals will be alive at the end of it? We did not find Kallimakus, but we have a link in the chain, and I will not sacrifice it on the altar of war-lust and vengeance.'

Menkaura nodded. 'Then we–'

He never got to finish his sentence.

A thunderclap of displaced air exploded as the Ankharu Blades' kine shield collapsed. A blizzard of freezing mist shrieked down the gallery. Feral shapes followed in its wake.

Savage killers with the coldest hearts in the world.

A howling surge of aggression and the raw redness of wolf minds staggered Sanakht with its ferocity. He shielded his visor with a raised arm as a blitzing storm of diamond-hard ice swept over him and Lucius.

They stepped apart, giving each other room to fight.

Howls and bounding shapes flew at them on the wings of the storm, dark grey, blue and flame-red. No individual minds, only a snarling pack mentality united in hate.

They came in a rush, too many even for him.

A thing of reeking fur and foamed jaws threw itself at him. Sanakht ducked and slashed his hawk-head sword through its throat. His blade parted only ice and smoke, sending him momentarily off balance.

A black-and-red-eyed shade came at him from behind.

He lowered his shoulder and thrust his jackal blade under his arm. The shadow broke apart in howling laughter. Searing pain lanced into his side as a jag-toothed spear ripped open his flank.

'Fight in the open, damn you!' he yelled, struggling to hold to the enumerations and pinpoint a single mind in the tempest.

Howling ululated on the wind. Was the storm mocking him?

'Like you do, sorcerer?' said a voice at his shoulder.

Sanakht spun on his heel, swords scissoring.

He struck nothing, his mind awash with howling.

A heavy shape barrelled into Sanakht as he tore off his helm. They landed hard. Sanakht punched with the quillons of his jackal sword, drawing a bestial grunt and a satisfying crack. A fist cracked against his cheek in return, hard enough to split bone.

A face loomed before him. Maned and bearded with tar-black hair held in braids by rings of bone and iron. The Wolf's face was more beast than man. Lips drawn back over jagged teeth foamed with red saliva; one eye bionic, the other flecked copper with pupils so dilated as to be almost entirely black.

Sanakht slammed his forehead into the warrior's face.

'Balegyr's skull is solid like the Aett,' laughed the Wolf as he launched his own headbutt. 'But a warlock's head is soft.'

Blinding light exploded before Sanakht; it felt as if a portion of his skull were suddenly concave. He gasped at the paralysing sharpness of the pain, both swords falling from his grip and helpless as the Wolf throttled the life out of him with its bare hands.

He stared into the eyes of his killer, unable to comprehend how this base savage had beaten him. He was the best swordsman of the Legions, a warrior beyond compare. The sheer banality of this death struck Sanakht as monstrously unjust.

Then a crack like lightning, and the Wolf's grin vanished.

His head jerked back like a cur on a leash.

Balegyr's mortal eye bulged, and Sanakht saw the serpentine coil of a whip around his neck. The Wolf clawed at the noose as it tightened with hideously undulant motions. Blood welled between his fingers as it chewed the meat of his throat.

A figure without a helm appeared behind the Wolf like something from a dream, beautiful beyond words. Sanakht recognised the patrician features and

bleach-white hair, but the impossibility of his being here was surely proof of Sanakht's imminent demise. What else could explain the presence of Fulgrim himself?

The most perfect specimen of the Legions moved with the fluid economy of a seasoned killer.

A killer Sanakht knew.

'You don't get to kill this one,' said Fulgrim with the voice of Lucius, jerking the whip taut. 'He's mine.'

The Wolf spun to his feet, drawing and firing a fetish-hung pistol in one movement. Lucius kicked off the wall and his sword sliced like a guillotine blade. Balegyr's arm fell away from his body at the elbow.

Lucius struck again before he landed in a crouch, sword angled away from his body, one hand outstretched.

The Wolf dropped to his knees with the dome of his skull missing above his brow. He reached for Lucius, but crashed forwards with his brains spilling onto the gallery.

'Always such wasteful theatrics,' rasped Sanakht.

'He's dead, isn't he?' countered Lucius.

Sanakht conceded the point and pushed himself up onto his elbow. He stared at the transformed Lucius, registering gunfire, clashing steel and aetheric backlash from somewhere behind him.

'Your face…?' he said.

'You like it?' grinned Lucius. 'I had been hoping for a more dramatic unveiling, but one of these damned wolves actually got close enough to put a dent in my helmet.'

Sanakht was about to reply when a sudden stab of psychic pain snapped his head up. He felt the bright presence of a murderer's mind. A mind utterly unlike the savagery of the wolves. One taken to the brink of ruination by years of grief and abuse, then honed to a lethal edge by ascetic discipline to match that of Legion training.

'On your left!' cried Sanakht, thrusting his hand out with what power was left to him as a curved blade arced into the fractional gap at the beautiful swordsman's gorget.

Legion reflexes were inhumanly fast, but this was a master's cut, travelling the shortest route to its target.

Even Lucius couldn't avoid it.

Concussed and without enumerations, Sanakht's kine-push was weak and unfocused, a neophyte's effort.

It altered the blade's course by a mere three millimetres.

But instead of flesh, it sliced a sparking groove across Lucius' gorget. The swordsman's eyes went wide and Sanakht saw frustration at an answer denied in his expression.

Lucius danced away from a swift reverse cut, his sword flashing up to block a stunning chain of life-ending strikes. He circled, parrying and blocking, now relishing the contest.

The mist cleared and Sanakht saw who dared face Lucius.

A mortal of the Dragon Nations, wearing loose-fitting robes well suited for swordplay. He wore no armour – further proof he was utterly insane – and fought with a blade of near-perfect balance and curvature.

'This one has skill!' said Lucius, deflecting precision blows that would have left a lesser man in pieces.

'Kill him and be done with it.'

'Not till I teach him a lesson or three.'

As the trauma of his injury began to fade, Sanakht pushed his mind into the higher enumerations. He stabbed a psychic barb into the mortal's mind.

The man staggered, only just managing to turn aside a thundering blow that ought to have cut him in two.

'Don't you dare!' cried Lucius, shooting Sanakht a venomous glare. 'Don't you dare touch him. He's mine.'

Sanakht withdrew the barb. He had already seen enough.

Yasu Nagasena. An agent of the Emperor.

Sent here by the Sigillite on the word of...

Sanakht swung onto one knee. Both swords leapt to his hands.

Lucius switched his grip with a beatific smile, matching the mortal's angular two-handed posture. They traded blows for a handful of seconds – an eternity longer than most would have lasted against Lucius.

But no matter their skill or heart, a duel between a mortal and a legionary could end in only one way.

Lucius parried a perfectly executed thrust and rolled his wrists to trap Nagasena's blade in the crook of his elbow. He twisted his arm and the gleaming blade snapped cleanly in two.

The look of pain on the mortal's face suggested he'd lost a firstborn son.

Lucius laughed at Nagasena's horror and stepped in close to haul him from his feet. He held him close as if studying an idiot savant.

'You're good,' he said, 'but you're no little raven.'

Nagasena struggled in the swordsman's grip, but Lucius was already bored of him. Rather than honour his foe with a clean death, Lucius simply hurled him from the gallery.

Another shape emerged from the icy mist, but this was no gifted mortal. This was a legionary plated in brushed steel that could barely contain the awesome power he commanded.

‘Perhaps *I* will offer more of a challenge?’ said Dio Promus.

His psychic hood blazed with aether power and Sanakht felt the unbreakable mental architecture of Ultramar’s teachings.

‘Run,’ said Sanakht.

A psy-blizzard engulfed the Scarab Occult as howling Wolves battered against them like barbarians of antiquity facing the legions of the Romanii. Bolts caromed explosively from battleplate as ice-wreathed axes hacked at the silver-steel hafts of Sekhmet psy-blades.

Gunfire stitched along the gallery and grenade explosions sent jagged fragments of hot steel flying. Its width denied the Thousand Sons weight of numbers, but they had other, greater advantages.

Or so Ahriman had thought.

Aether lightning sparked harmlessly and firestorms guttered in the teeth of the Fenrisian snowstorm. Raptures to boil the blood dissipated, and power to draw forth lethal nightmares vanished like mist.

The Feathered Ones and Sun Scarabs fought the screeching automata to their rear and flank as Memunim’s few Ankharu Blades swatted leaping Mechanicum warrior-thralls from the air with kine blows and bolter rounds.

The structure shook with seismic force as broadsides from the enemy warships in the void pummelled it with mass drivers and macro-cannons. A braying war-horn echoed with lunatic fury. Impossible to know whether it was near or far, friend or foe.

Ahriman kept his body between the flying shrapnel and the mortals he had come to find. All three were bleeding freely from scores of cuts, and they were the least wounded.

Four of the Scarab Occult were already dead.

Because Onuris Hex led them as he always did, wielding lethal fusions of aether powers: seersight to guide their blows, kine fields for added protection, biomancy to sustain them and channelled Pyrae fires to scorch the earth.

But their enemies were not undefended. The frosted plates of their armour were cut with marks of aversion and hung with wolf-paw fetishes, furred talismans and beaded charms such as a woad-smeared shaman might craft.

Crude defences, but effective for a while.

Ever the Thousand Sons forgot Ahriman’s first principle.

+Legionaries first, psykers second!+

Onuris Hex assimilated Ahriman’s command instantly, eschewing his psychic mastery in favour of his warrior skills. He spun the hooked end of his weapon

around a Wolf's leg and pulled him off balance. The warrior to his left thrust for the Wolf's exposed throat. One of his Fenrisian brothers caught the descending blade and rammed it into the floor. He fired a mass-reactive into the Sekhmet warrior's faceplate.

The metal deformed under the impact, but held firm.

A momentary gap opened.

A Wolf with a body and limbs forged in bare steel saw it and threw himself forwards like a battering ram. The Scarab Occult reeled before the hammer-blow of his charge.

It was all the Wolves needed. A howling madman leapt into the gap, swinging a twin-bladed felling axe as though it weighed nothing at all. Cold lightning flickered as its edge clove metal and the rest of the Wolves followed him.

One with a saw-toothed harpoon spear and another with an ice-bladed sword forced a wedge into the shield-wall, turning the battle into a swirling free-for-all.

Ahriman saw the storm-wreathed leader of the Wolves, a warrior whose helm was painted with a skull icon he had seen before. He nodded in recognition of an equal.

The Wolf pointed to Ahriman, as though claiming a kill.

+I see you, Ahzek Ahriman,+ sent the Rune Priest.

His voice echoed like dry winds over bleak tundra.

Flakes of snow fell between them with infinite slowness as they conversed at the speed of thought, the warriors around them fighting as if in a dream.

+How is it you know me?+

+I see your wyrd. It ends badly.+

+Who are you?+

+Bödvar Bjarki, Rune Priest to Jarl Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot of Tra, blood-brother of Ulvurul Heoroth, called *Longfang*.'

+Rune Priest,+ sneered Ahriman. +I met one of your kind. His name was Othere Wyrdmake. He too spoke of wyrd, but now he sleeps on the red snow of Prospero.+

+I felt you unmake his thread that day,+ said Bjarki. +I wonder if you know what that cost you?+

Ahriman's eyes darted to his heqa staff. Once it had been blue and gold, but moments after Wyrdmake's death it had darkened to ebon black.

+I will do the same to you,+ promised Ahriman.

+No, that is not my wyrd.+

Before Ahriman could reply, booming impacts rang out like the pealing of the mighty division bell summoning the Council of Terra to the Hegemon. The shout of an insane god-engine filled the chamber, and the link between Ahriman and Bjarki was abruptly severed.

Zalgolyssa smashed its way inside, and the combat on the gallery paused at the sight of it. The Reaver's carapace bled rust-coloured oil and vented poisonous fumes in labouring breaths. Like an apex carnivore of antediluvian times, it loosed a thunderous roar and lifted its left arm. A length of berthing chain hung from its clawed fist, and at its end was the severed head of a bronze-armoured Warhound.

Zalgolyssa raised its other arm. Ammunition hoppers clattered and pneumatic auto-loaders slammed enormous shells into the breech of its gatling blaster.

+Take cover!+ yelled Ahriman, lifting Lemuel and Camille as he ran for the nearest cell.

Aforgomon dragged the other woman as *Zalgolyssa* opened fire.

The world erupted in a thunderous hell storm of detonations as the Titan weapon raked the gallery. Percussive blasts merged into a never-ending roar of deafening explosions and earth-shaking impacts. A hurricane of rock fragments ricocheted from every wall and Lemuel screamed in pain, blood blooming all down his leg. Ahriman made himself into a shield as a fireball blazed into the cell, its sucking backdraught drawing out every last molecule of oxygen.

The three mortals fought for breath, and Ahriman used Pavoni artes to oxygenate the atmosphere around their heads.

Then it was over. The sudden silence was as shocking as the furious violence of the barrage.

+*Move now!*+

Ahriman was still reeling from the sensory overload.

+*Go. Now!*+

+Ignis? Is that you?+

+*Yes. Get out of there now.*+

Ahriman hauled Lemuel and Camille upright, and staggered over to the cell door, the ringing in his ears making everything seem dulled and washed-out. Clouds of toxic propellant smoke fogged what was left of the gallery. The parapet was all but gone, barely a metre of stonework still protruding from the wall. Thousand Sons emerged hesitantly from smoke-filled cells to find the kind of hellscape that only artillery-grade shells could create.

Below, the Reaver stood with its arm outstretched, coils of blue smoke hissing from vent-ports on its topside. Ahriman couldn't shake the sensation it was looking directly at him.

+Where are you, Ignis?+ he asked.

The Titan's entire body inclined as though taking a bow.

+*I took the liberty of projecting my consciousness into* Zalgolyssa *to ensure its barrage was made without error.*+

+You took over a Titan?+

+An act for which I will pay a heavy repercussive price later, but for now, hold on to something.+

Ahriman was about to ask why, then saw exactly what Ignis intended. He turned back into the cell as *Zalgolyssa* began rotating its fist, swinging the severed Warhound's head on the end of the chain like an antique flail. The tempo increased until the Titan lowered its right shoulder and heaved its arm forwards.

The chained head arced over like a wrecking ball and slammed into the gallery with a booming crash of metal on stone. More debris fell, crushing the few pitiful souls left alive below.

Aforgomon still held the third woman. She was Prosperine, but Ahriman had no time for sentimentality. He held Camille out to the daemon-yokai.

'Take Mistress Shivani,' he said. 'Leave the other one.'

'No!' cried Camille as the daemon threw the Prosperine woman to the floor and twisted her arm behind her back. 'No! Throne, no! Chaiya! Please, no! Don't! Chaiya!'

'Camille!' cried the fallen woman, scrambling to her feet, but a backhand blow from Aforgomon sent her sprawling. She crumpled in the corner of the cell and did not rise.

Ahriman left the cell, emerging into choking clouds of dust raining down from above. He moved with swift strides along the crumbling gallery towards the head buried in the wall. The chain attached to it was a taut, shivering bridge to the Titan below. Aforgomon followed at his heels, pushing the weeping and struggling Camille Shivani in front.

'Please, Ahzek,' begged Lemuel. 'Don't leave Chaiya.'

'The Prosperine woman? She is Mistress Shivani's companion?'

'Yes.'

'She is irrelevant,' said Ahriman, wreathed in scraps of residual propellant drifting like slow-falling fireflies.

'Irrelevant?' gasped Lemuel as the edge of the blasted gallery crumbled and chunks of debris cascaded downwards. 'No one is irrelevant.'

'There's truth in that,' agreed Ahriman, 'but some are less relevant than others.'

Ahead, the Thousand Sons were already scrambling down the chain towards the Reaver, each link a metre wide and twice that in length. Sanakht was already crouched on *Zalgolyssa'*s upper carapace, next to a warrior wearing a face that did not match his aura. Ahriman and Aforgomon were the last to reach the chain bridge, where Menkaura stood with his gauntlets pressed against the Warhound's groaning skull, pinning it in place.

'The Order of Ruin never cease to amaze me,' he said through gritted teeth as the Titan's head lurched and the stonework around it crumbled. 'But you need to

go while you still can.'

The vibrations of the Thousand Sons on the chain were working the Titan's head loose, like a rotten tooth prised from a gum.

But for Menkaura's powers, it would already have fallen.

'Menkaura–' began Ahriman as Aforgomon leapt onto the chain, lifting Camille as easily as he might a child. 'This should not have been necessary.'

'And yet it is,' grunted the Corvidae seer.

'The Wolves and the son of Guilliman would say this was entirely necessary,' said Aforgomon, turning to shelter Camille as a burst of mass-reactives ricocheted from the chain. Explosive shells slashed between the gallery and *Zalgolyssa* as the Thousand Sons clustered atop the Reaver's carapace returned fire. Ahriman looked back as warriors in dust-caked armour emerged from the cover of the cells long enough to shoot.

'A warrior of Ultramar fights with the Wolves?'

Aforgomon nodded. ***'Yes, though he has strayed far from his once-path.'***

Ahriman swept his mind over the distant figures, feeling the claws of the Rune Priest's mind scratch at his mind like a rabid dog. But he sensed another mind too, one with the perfect discipline known only to Prospero and Ultramar.

'The headsman's axe knows not where it is to fall,' he said. 'It is simply a weapon directed by the hand of another.'

'Give me the other mortal,' said Aforgomon, holding its arms out to receive Lemuel. Ahriman shook his head.

'No, he stays with me,' he said, holstering his weapon and turning to Menkaura.

'Brother,' said Ahriman.

Menkaura shook his head. 'My journey on this path ends now.'

'No, you must–'

'I said *go!*' shouted Menkaura, the kine power surging through him giving his words physical force.

Ahriman nodded and turned back to the chain. He took an iron grip on Lemuel's wrist and knelt like an Assault Marine preparing to trigger a jump pack. He sprang upwards in a powered leap that easily carried him onto the chain. He heard Lemuel yell in fear as he swung like a pendulum out over empty space, fifty metres above the ground.

Mass-reactives slashed the air around him as Ahriman half slid, half climbed down the chain, dragging Lemuel and the urn he refused to relinquish behind him. Kine pulses diverted enemy fire and pyrokine layers immolated shells prematurely.

The enormous chain sagged, suddenly slack as the smashed Titan's head tore free of the wall.

Was Menkaura already dead? He had no time to look back.

Ahriman swayed with its lurching motion, barely maintaining his balance. Aforgomon dropped to the Reaver's carapace and turned towards him, its daemonic fire bright with expectation.

And an agonising burst of seersight rammed into the forefront of Ahriman's mind.

He staggered, almost losing his grip on Lemuel.

…a warrior raised in the Five Hundred Worlds, driven by the most terrible guilt. Clad in steel-dust armour, not cobalt-blue. One who no longer called Guilliman his master, a legionary whose very duty would be his undoing…

Ahriman's head snapped around in time to see the Ultramarian psyker unleash a ghostly warrior of psychic fire towards them – an avatar of ancient Macragge in golden armour and bearing a long pilum with a tip of blazing aether-light.

It flew like a comet, burning between Ahriman and Lemuel.

He bit down on repercussive pain as the spectral fire seared Lemuel's arm to ash from the elbow down. Ahriman reached for his former neophyte, already knowing it was too late.

Lemuel cried in terror as he fell from the chain.

And with a final, grinding crack of stone and steel, the Warhound's head fell free of the gallery. Ahriman leapt, desperately reaching for the edge of *Zalgolyssa'*s carapace.

Too far. He wasn't going to make it.

He was falling down among the dead men.

A metallic hand snapped shut on his vambrace, the power of its grip cracking the ceramite.

Ahriman looked up to see Aforgomon holding him.

'I have you,' said the daemon.

The mighty Reaver Zalgolyssa comes to the legionaries' aid

TWELVE

First signs
Rust and rest
The fallen tower

Borne aloft by surges of emotion and swells of turbulent consciousnesses, Amon soared on the tides of the Great Ocean.

+This is life as it ought to be experienced,+ cried Magnus, spiralling above him. +Free of physical constraints and limited only by our imagination.+

Joy surged through Amon as he and Magnus blazed through the immaterium like shooting stars. No shattered spine held Amon in a realm where physical laws were meaningless.

Here, there was no good and evil, right or wrong.

The searing trail they left was the brightest beacon, drawing warp creatures of every configuration – from the raptor flocks of atavistic scrap-feeders to titanic leviathans whose mere existence defied human contemplation.

And yet they flew unmolested.

Even broken, Magnus was known to the denizens of the Great Ocean and none dared trouble him. The brazen entities of purest rage turned away as well, their blunted survival instincts recognising a destroyer when they sensed one.

Amon kept close to his father, terrified and enthralled at the risks they took in flying so brightly. The warp entities might fear Magnus, but Amon was nothing to them.

Stray too far and he would be on his own.

His subtle body was wrought from the stuff of dreams into his idealised form of his imagined self, armour gleaming like translucent crystal, vivid red and molten gold.

+Come, Amon!+ cried Magnus, spinning to shed corkscrewing comets of inspiration. +Cast off that echoed aspect. Be whatever you wish – a god in mortal form, a winged spirit or a glittering dragon of fire!+

A twist of thought and Amon became a blaze of coruscating energy, an ultra-dense helix of spinning wheels and eyes, chains of thought more elegant than anything conceived by the greatest mortal philosophers. It made him beautiful, and his tears of joy became newborn stars in the warp's firmament.

Magnus flew as a glittering phoenix with wings of blazing amber, starfire eyes and the heart of a supernova. His power and intellect were as one, and he soared

on aetheric winds to blaze a trail of light as he went. Where it bled into the material realm, it gifted wondrous dreams to receptive minds.

They flew far from the Planet of the Sorcerers towards what Magnus had called the Orrery, travelling beyond the limits of space and time, achieving in a breath what was impossible for all but a handful of gifted individuals. They penetrated the hearts of warp storms of sorrowed beauty, skirted the petulant darkness of Lorgar's Ruinstorm and crested slow-blooming maelstroms of gathering hope. Randomness was everywhere and Amon sought to find meaning in the patterns. The Great Ocean responded to his desire by reshaping itself, tapestries of memory woven from the fabric of things forgotten, things remembered and things impossible.

Amid the chaos of the Great Ocean, they followed geometric configurations, clues in cosmic alignments and multi-dimensional arrays of perfect synchrony. Confluences of intersecting realities and auspicious convergences presented themselves, and the temptation to follow each to its ending was overwhelming. The sheer thrill of exploring the farthest reaches of the Great Ocean at his father's side was an intoxicating reminder of glories once thought quotidian.

Empyreal worlds whose atmospheres were rich in meaning, where every volume contained within Borges' theoretical library might be stored. Then there were the worlds of fractal complexity upon which every pen scratch since the dawn of time could be recorded. Amon saw a newborn galaxy where the secrets of Akasha were carried on the wavelengths of its starlight, and basked in its radiant illumination.

But in the end, Magnus had only one place in mind to become the Orrery – somewhere the limitless potential of the Great Ocean could alloy with the material universe, where a metaphorical sea of dreams could be made real. A world veiled from sight by alignments of galaxies and which Magnus would secure with celestial locks that would only open when the stars aligned.

+Such beauty makes it all too easy to forget that the Warmaster has torn the galaxy in two,+ said Amon as they paused to admire what Magnus had found. +Thoughts of war seem so far away.+

+The vastness of the immaterium has that effect,+ agreed Magnus. +It makes mortal affairs pale to insignificance.+

+If such affairs do not matter in the grand tapestry of existence, why then do we endure so much pain and suffering to alter them?+ said Amon. +What grand deed has ever caused the slightest ripple in the universe when seen from so lofty a cosmic perspective?+

Magnus extended his burning wings and soared towards an unfolding conflagration of energies, a radiant nebula of screaming emotions shaped by some unseen catastrophe in the material universe.

+We are all bound by the better angels of our natures, Amon. None of us can afford to be neutral while the great battle of our time unfolds. Our brothers tear at one another with hatred only made possible by the corruption of love, and could we live with ourselves if we did not try to lessen that horror?+

+Even if we cannot affect the outcome?+

+Who says *I* cannot?+ said Magnus.

+One might call such a belief egotistical.+

+Then let me ask you this. Imagine you alone had guarded Prospero's shores when the Wolves came. Would you have stood aside? Knowing you had no hope of altering the outcome of the battle, would you have given up?+

+No, I would have fought.+

+And that is why I act. For all that we are condemned, for all that our names and deeds will be blackened from now until the stars go out, I have always sought to act with honour, Uthizzar. With pride, yes, but always with…+

Magnus paused and Amon felt a tremor ripple out through the warp. The creatures of the warp felt it too and fixed hungry eyes upon them.

+My lord? Is something wrong?+

Magnus' image flickered, his blazing wings guttering and dying as his mortal form resolved itself amid the fading fire. The Crimson King Amon had last seen atop the Obsidian Tower was gone and the being before him was a shadow of that mighty warrior-lord. The cost of this flight in the Great Ocean was proving far greater than Amon had feared.

Among the many dangers of the Great Ocean were seductions that drew travellers farther from their bodies than was safe. And, like neophytes on their first flight, Magnus and Amon had gone deeper than ever to find what they sought.

Hostile things uncoiled in the darkness, sensing unexpected opportunity and gathering like carrion around a fresh corpse.

+Baleq?+ said Magnus, uncertainty giving his words a brittle edge. +Baleq Uthizzar, is that you? Your aura is… different.+

+No, my lord, it is Amon.+

+Amon of the Corvidae? Why are you here? I summoned Baleq to attend upon me.+

Amon hesitated before answering, seeing dreadful uncertainty enter the primarch's aura like a poison. It formed turbulent swells and swirling aether vortices around them, the early signs of a gathering storm.

+Baleq is not here, my lord,+ he said. +He… he died.+

+Died? What are you talking about? Baleq is not dead – I spoke with him just this morning in the Reflecting Caves.+

+No, my lord,+ said Amon, the sight of his father's confusion like a knife to the heart. That Amon was utterly helpless against this insidious and unreachable foe was crushing. +You did not.+

Magnus' fractured state spread agitation through the warp like blood spilt into water. Though Amon suspected the primarch's splintered soul might suffer further degeneration in the warp, the hope of its restoration seemed worth the risk.

+Of course I did,+ said Magnus. +I… Amon? Is that you?+

+Yes, my lord,+ said Amon, and the fear in his father's aura made him weep. +We need to return to the Obsidian Tower.+

+The Obsidian Tower? I know of no such place,+ snapped Magnus. +You speak in riddles, Amon. In the Emperor's name, tell me why Uthizzar is not here.+

Amon could not bring himself to reveal the truth of what had befallen Baleq Uthizzar, could not hurt his father by telling him it had been his own power that killed the Athanaean telepath after he had seen his father's thoughts. That truth would bring the predatory warp beasts down on them without mercy.

+We return to Prospero,+ declared Magnus. +And *then* we will get to the bottom of your lies, Amon.+

+My lord, I do not lie, and we cannot return to Prospero.+

+Why not?+

A lie would not serve, only the truth – and the things in the dark bared immaterial fangs like knives being sharpened.

+Prospero is no more. The Wolves burned it to ash.+

A burst of grief exploded from Magnus, a primal venting of emotion that bore an unimaginable weight of guilty knowledge. It set the warp aflame in every direction, and millions of mortal nightmares were born on tens of thousands of worlds.

Amon screamed as the warp fire burned his subtle body, his primarch's fears and secrets like hot brands upon his soul. The flames incinerated his armour, leaving his body of light horribly vulnerable. His mind fled to the higher enumerations, throwing up instinctual defences and detaching his screaming consciousness from repercussive sensations.

With the pain under control, Amon's warp sight pierced the psychic conflagration Magnus had unleashed.

The Crimson King had vanished.

Amon was utterly alone.

And the things in the darkness fell upon him.

Peace of a sort had fallen on Kamiti Sona. The battle was over and the tally of the dead was being made. Yasu Nagasena stood alone in the ruins of the main gallery,

surrounded by blackened corpses of its former inmates. The Vorax swept the chamber searching for signs of life, ending any who still had breath in their lungs. The reek of burning bodies clung to him like a shroud.

The Thousand Sons were gone, borne away on the back of the monstrous god-machine, but what had become of them was yet a mystery. A storm of witchery prevented any immediate pursuit, but Araxe and his Ursarax were even now sweeping the upper levels of the prison for signs of the red sorcerers.

Nagasena stood over the first man he had killed this day. He dropped to his knees like a devotee in a fane, ready to prostrate himself before his god. He grunted in pain. His side was a fiery mass of bruising and cracked ribs, but that was a small price to pay for his life.

The beautiful swordsman with the likeness of the primarch Fulgrim had thrown him contemptuously from the upper gallery, but a leaping Ursarax caught him and bore him to the ground.

Nagasena had lived, but *Shoujiki* had not.

He lifted the broken sword, its blade ending in a clean break a handspan above the circular guard. Lifting it to his lips, he kissed the length of gleaming steel before turning and ramming it into the corpse.

'Your name is *Shoujiki,* which means honesty,' he said, bowing to the embedded blade. 'You were my virtue and my burden. You saved my soul and my life. For this I thank you.'

Nagasena clasped his hands before him, letting the sounds of burning corpses and the crackle of flames wash over him.

'Before you came to me, I was a fool and a braggart, a man of low morals and wicked temperament. But when Master Nagamitsu united us, your truth became part of me. I have never spoken falsely or dishonoured your name since.'

Nagasena lifted his head and sang softly in the tongue of his homeland, the words lilting.

'*Broken blade, lie you there,*
Deep buried in a vanquished foe.
As I draw new steel from sheath,
Look you now on a setting sun,
Sharp shearer on this field of death.
Your time of rust and rest is here.
Now repose, my lightning blade,
Who raised kings and cast them down.
Brother to my worthless hand,
Farewell, truth-bearing sword!'

With the words spoken, Nagasena felt another piece unravel from his soul, a lock placed around the wickedness of his old life crumble to dust. The oath he'd

laid upon *Shoujiki'*s blade had been his anchor, his moral compass when such things were the most prized gifts of all.

He felt the presence of someone standing behind him, someone with sense enough not to interrupt his ritual. From the warning hackles rising on his neck, he knew it to be Bödvar Bjarki.

Nagasena stood in one fluid motion, turning on his heel and leaving *Shoujiki* embedded in the corpse. The Rune Priest cast his gaze around the carnage with the dispassionate eye of a man utterly unfazed by such bloodletting.

'Can you repair it?' asked Bjarki, nodding towards the broken sword.

'Can you bring your fallen brother back to life?' snapped Nagasena, instantly regretting it. Bjarki bared his fangs, and but for the authority Nagasena carried, he would already be dead for speaking such thoughtless words.

'I can't,' said Bjarki, 'but a weapon is not alive.'

'Forgive me, Bödvar,' said Nagasena, clasping his hands before him. 'Grief makes me speak without thinking. I just… I just thought you would understand what *Shoujiki* meant to me.'

'That blade was the work of a master,' agreed Bjarki, placing a giant hand on Nagasena's shoulder. 'Forged with craft and heart from the sharpest steel and dragon's breath. And I know *exactly* what it was to you. But even so, such things can be remade.'

'Not *Shoujiki,*' said Nagasena.

'Maybe, maybe not,' said Bjarki. 'Just do not mistake the blade for the man. One can break, but the other will endure.'

'I hope you are right, my friend.'

'That is for wyrd to know,' said Bjarki, turning away.

'I am sorry for the loss of Harr Balegyr,' said Nagasena.

Bjarki paused and nodded without turning back.

'It was his time,' he said with a fatalistic shrug. 'We will give him his sending when we are far from this place.'

'Sending?'

'A farewell of sorts. As you gave to your blade,' said Bjarki. 'He should be returned to Fenris, but if our threads do not lead back to Asaheim, then somewhere with an ocean will do. His tribe were Vattja, hunters of the many-armed ones of the *vatterdark.* Harr should go down into the ocean.'

'May I be present for his sending?'

Bjarki looked back over his shoulder.

'No,' he said, striding away. 'Come.'

Nagasena followed the Rune Priest.

'Have you received any word from Sister Caesaria?' he asked.

'No, which is bad, but she is not our responsibility.'

The Space Wolves were gathered around a pyre of burning bodies. Thick smoke hid the worst of their deformities, but not enough to make it easy to look upon them. The pack turned at their approach. Their yellow eyes were sullen and hostile with suppressed aggression.

'Let me kill this one,' said Svafnir Rackwulf before Bjarki could speak. 'He needs to walk with Harr Balegyr's shade. A warrior should know the reason why the wyrd cuts his thread.'

Nagasena looked past Rackwulf to where Olgyr Widdowsyn held the chain-leash of a painfully thin man of Nordafrik whose legs were clearly broken in several places. He clutched a chipped ceramic urn to his chest with his one remaining arm, and the lower half of his skull was enclosed by a brank's bridle of knotted leather. His eyes were wide with terror at the sight of the Wolf pack, and Nagasena knew exactly why.

'Lemuel Gaumon,' he said, and the man looked at him with a pleading look of desperate hope. The remembrancer's face as familiar to Nagasena as his own after so long spent studying his records. Five years in Kamiti Sona had aged him thrice that and melted the fat from his previously rotund frame.

Nagasena knelt beside Lemuel and reached up to unbuckle the mask gagging the man.

'That is not wise,' said Bjarki. 'You said this man was Ahriman's apprentice. He is likely maleficarum.'

'We can't question him if he is gagged.'

Bjarki grinned. 'I can rip the truth out of him without needing to hear corrupt words,' he promised, and the man whimpered in fear, struggling to push himself away even over the agony of two shattered legs.

'I must, Bödvar,' said Nagasena.

Bjarki shrugged and took the chain-leash from Widdowsyn. He yanked Lemuel's face upwards.

'We will remove the brank, remembrancer,' he said. 'But know this. You die if I smell even a fart of sorcery from you.'

Lemuel nodded and Bjarki dropped the chain. The splintered ends of broken bones in Lemuel's legs ground together and he cried out in muffled pain through the mask.

Nagasena looked Lemuel straight in the eye.

'My name is Yasu Nagasena,' he said. 'I am going to remove this device so you can answer my questions. Speak truthfully and your injuries will be healed, but you should know it will be extremely dangerous to lie. Nod if you understand what I have said.'

Lemuel did so and Nagasena carefully unbuckled the straps holding the leatherwork brank in place. Lemuel sucked in a juddering breath as it was pulled

clear, eyes wide with pain, skin slick with fear.

'They took Camille,' he said, the words coming out in a rush. 'Please, you have to get her back. And Chaiya, she's in one of the upper cells. The servitor-thing, it hit her. Maybe it killed her. I don't know. Please can you look? Help her.'

Nagasena held up a hand and Lemuel's babble ceased.

'The Thousand Sons took Mistress Shivani?'

'Yes.'

'And Mahavastu Kallimakus? They took him too?'

Lemuel's eyes flicked warily towards Bjarki, and Nagasena saw his terror of giving an answer that might see him killed.

'No.'

'They did not take him?'

'He was never here.'

Nagasena rocked back onto his haunches, processing this new information. He looked up at Bjarki, then returned his attention to Lemuel.

'These are the facts as I understand them,' he said. 'You, Mistress Shivani and Mahavastu Kallimakus were aboard the *Cypria Selene.* A mass-conveyor intercepted by the *Hrafnkel* at the system Mandeville point. Are my facts in error?'

Lemuel nodded. 'Yes. No. I mean, not exactly. Chaiya was there with us too.'

'Who is Chaiya?'

'A native of Prospero,' said Lemuel, and the Space Wolves spat at the mention of their enemy's home world. 'She and Camille were lovers. She left with us. She's up in the gallery – you have to help her. Please.'

'If you tell me what I need to know,' said Nagasena. 'Where is Kallimakus? Was he aboard the *Cypria Selene?*'

'Yes, Mahavastu was with us on the *Selene,*' gasped Lemuel, his face taut with ever-increasing pain. 'But I don't know what happened to him. I swear it. We were split up. They questioned us with our faces pressed to the dirt, mouths and eyes clogged with red earth. Men like him in leather masks with yellow eyes and knives of ice.'

Lemuel wept uncontrollably. 'They cut us into pieces, broke open our minds and ripped out every secret thought. Made us scream. Made us beg to die. And when they were done, they left us here in the dark. I swear by the Throne I don't know what happened to Mahavastu. I never saw him in this place.'

Nagasena looked into Lemuel Gaumon's pain-filled eyes, searching for deception, but finding none. He took a breath and came to a decision.

'If Chaiya is alive, I will bring her to you.'

'Thank you,' whispered Lemuel, his chest wracked with sobs.

‘And in return for your life and hers, you are going to help us find Ahzek Ahriman.’

‘What?’ cried Lemuel, the hope in his eyes retreating. ‘No! Please, not again. Don’t take me anywhere near those monsters. I beg you, please. Kill me if you must, but please don’t make me face Ahriman again.’

Bjarki grunted with impatience and knelt at Lemuel’s side. He bared his fangs with a feral grin, one brow cocked. Lemuel cringed in terror from the giant Wolf.

‘I am called Bödvar Bjarki, Rune Priest to Jarl Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot of Tra, blood-brother of Ulvurul Heoroth, called *Longfang,*’ said Bjarki. ‘Tell me, mortal, who do you fear most right now? Me or Ahzek Ahriman?’

‘You.’

‘But which of us do you *hate* more?’

‘Him,’ said Lemuel without pause.

‘And you want him dead, ja?’

‘Yes.’

Bjarki grinned. ‘Good, then it’s settled. You’ll tell us all you know about the red sorcerers and how to find them. Then you’ll tell me why they risked so much to free you.’

‘But I don’t know anything.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Bjarki, standing and spitting again, as though just talking to Lemuel had somehow sullied him. The Rune Priest turned to Olgyr Widdowsyn.

‘You know something of mortal flesh,’ he said. ‘Make sure he doesn’t die and bring him aboard the *Doramaar.*’

‘I’ll see it done,’ said Widdowsyn, reaching down and all but throwing Lemuel over his shoulder. The remembrancer screamed in pain as he was carried away.

‘Was he telling the truth?’ asked Nagasena.

‘Yes, or at least he thinks he is.’

‘You believe his mind could have been tampered with?’

‘It wouldn’t be the first time they tried it,’ said Bjarki, tapping a finger to his blood-streaked forehead. ‘Sorcerers are tricky like that. Perhaps none who spend any time with the sons of Magnus are to be trusted.’

‘I sincerely hope you are wrong,’ said Nagasena. ‘For he is our best hope of finding the Thousand Sons.’

‘Maybe not,’ said an exhausted voice behind them.

Bjarki snarled as he caught a familiar scent and spun on his heel, one hand reaching for his weapon, the other pistoning out before him. A pale nimbus of light wreathed his gauntlet.

Nagasena followed the Rune Priest’s lead and reached for *Shoujiki,* but found his scabbard empty. The volkite was gone too, but then he saw he would have no need of weapons.

Dio Promus dragged an unconscious warrior armoured in crimson plate whose crumpled face was a mask of blood.

‘His name is Menkaura.’

Amon sucked in a breath of furnace-hot air. It scorched his lungs with aetheric power. His eyes snapped open and he stared into the dark heart of an enormous warp storm raging over the Obsidian Tower. The eye of the storm seethed with power. Forking bolts of lightning exploded around him. Broken spires fell from the tower in cascades of vitrified stone.

Pain surged through Amon, almost blinding him with its intensity. He screamed at the memory of nightmare claws and terrible fangs tearing his subtle body, feral warp-things feasting on him in frenzied packs.

Too many to fight; he’d barely escaped back to his body.

He tried to rise, but couldn’t move.

Amon remembered the golden support throne enclosing his crippled body. After the limitless freedom he’d so recently known, immobility was a fresh terror discovered anew.

‘Father!’ he screamed, but the storm only laughed at him.

He twisted his head, seeing no sign of his primarch.

Veins bulged at his throat as he struggled to move, feeling ghosts of sensation in his limbs. How long had they been flying the Great Ocean? How much had his body healed in his spirit’s absence?

Not enough.

The storm was growing bolder. Thunder boomed, echoing from towering mountain ranges that had not existed when Amon last looked from this summit. Hurricane winds battered the Obsidian Tower and enormous chunks of rock fell from its sides like ice calving from a glacier.

Amon forced himself into the lower enumerations, imposing calm where only disorder ruled. His body was yet ruined, but it was still his to command. If not by biological means, then by psychic ones.

The wind howled with aether power and Amon drew it into his flesh, screaming as his abused body started to come undone from the inside. He forced kine power into his bones, willing himself to stand as the Obsidian Tower shook itself apart.

Slowly, so slowly, every millimetre upright a battle, Amon rose from the throne.

‘Magnus the Red!’ he yelled into the storm’s teeth. ‘Show yourself!’

Each step was agony, as though his bones were made of slowly fracturing glass. He forced the pain aside and walked to the centre of the swaying tower. He forced himself to kneel, placing a hand flat against its sigil-etched surface as he sought some trace of his gene-sire within.

There was nothing.

The Obsidian Tower was abandoned.

Amon stood with a grunt of pain, knowing that no artes of the Pavoni could undo the damage he was doing to himself. He sent a psychic summons into the storm and limped to the tower's crumbling edges.

Firestorms painted every horizon in red. The Planet of the Sorcerers burned in chaotic flux. Amon felt the wildness of the world slipping beyond all hope of control, its unfettered power of creation released from the dominance of intellect.

'Where did you go?' said Amon.

No answer was forthcoming, but Amon could yet feel his father's presence, distant, faint and so terribly lost.

'A mind without purpose will wander in dark places,' he said, as a roaring blast of turbines cut through the deafening sound of cracking stone.

Amon looked up as his Stormbird swooped from the storm like the phoenix on its way to the last fire. It circled the tower once before hovering in front of Amon and lowering its assault ramp.

He stepped onto the aircraft just as the Obsidian Tower collapsed in an avalanche of inert rock and soulless glass. It slumped into a pyramid of glittering black shards, a dark mockery of all they had lost.

The Stormbird turned from the ruin of the Crimson King's tower, and Amon swept his gaze out over the maddened world in search of the primarch.

'I will bring you home, father,' he said.

Though the battle for Kamiti Sona was over, violent spasms still smouldered in its collapsing depths. Vengeful Sisters of Silence hunted packs of hooting, grunting beasts in vicious skirmishes throughout the monolithic vaults of the orbital prison.

True to his word, Yasu Nagasena located a woman that matched Lemuel Gaumon's description in the upper cells. She lived, but had suffered a fractured jaw and was badly concussed. With most of the inmates dead and the captives secure, Kamiti Sona was being abandoned. Promus, Nagasena and Bjarki led the Imperial forces through the destruction left in the traitor Reaver's wake.

They made their way back to the embarkation decks through smashed gateways and ruined hallways of crushed stonework. Muttering wraiths lingered in the shadows, and Bjarki was heard to speak words of warding against new-birthed wights of the Underverse.

At length, Dio Promus led them onto the upper embarkation deck and such a scene of devastation to make even the staunchest blanch. Hundreds of torn bodies lay strewn around the wreckage of the entire deck: bronze-armoured Sisters, entire maniples of robots and enemy legionaries without blazons or any identifying marks on their armour.

All killed, friend and foe alike, by the traitor Reaver.

The god-machine was on its knees, its lifeless head hung low over the molten ruin of its torso. Blue-hot fires flickered within its skull and a rain of burning machine-blood drizzled from its shattered body.

An Imperial Warhound lay beneath it, both its legs crushed and its plasma blastgun still lambent with the heat of a killing shot. Magos Videns and the rest of the Mechanicum contingent rushed heedless through the battlefield towards the fallen Warhound, but there was nothing to be done for it.

The others followed more warily, despatching wounded enemies and checking for survivors among the Sisters. One thing swiftly became clear.

No Thousand Sons numbered among the fallen.

Nor was there any sign of enemy gunships.

'Antaka Cyvaan destroyed the enemy vessel?' asked Promus.

'He is Raven Guard,' said Nagasena, which was answer enough.

Promus swore. 'Then the enemy are loose in the void, and they will try to seize a ship.'

The Librarian opened a vox-link to the *Arethusa.*

'Magos Uexküll,' he said. 'This is Promus. The enemy is en route to you aboard gunships. Prepare to repel boarders.'

'*Boarders?*' replied the master of the *Arethusa*. '*The void churns with e-mag distortion, but I detect no incoming craft of any description.*'

'They are not aboard mere gunboats,' said a woman's voice thick with pain. Sister Caesaria's armour was sheeted with blood from pauldrons to greaves, her breastplate split down its centre and her skull gleaming red. But for Svafnir Rackwulf's supporting arm, she would not be standing.

'Do you know how they escaped?' said Nagasena.

'They took the *Osiris Panthea,*' said Caesaria, coughing up a wad of bloody tissue. 'Right from under us, cargo and all…'

'*Osiris Panthea?*' said Promus. 'What is that?'

Caesaria gave a bitter bark of irony.

'It's a Black Ship.'

THIRTEEN

Osiris Panthea
A vast and terrible thing
Find him

The others hated the Black Ship, but the sepulchral compartments within the *Osiris Panthea*'s void-dark hull were a blessed relief to Hathor Maat. The layered walls of cold-forged iron and null-carbon dulled his connection to the Great Ocean, calming the sedition of his flesh.

Thus far, his Pavoni artes were keeping the mutiny in check, but when it became impossible to conceal… what then?

In response to such careless thoughts, his hands stirred with motion. He slammed them against an iron bulkhead hard enough to buckle the metal. He'd broken their bones and filled his gauntlets with blood a hundred times over. It didn't make any difference; they always healed, treacherously remaking themselves with milky eyes, crooked teeth or suckered tongues.

For now they remained the hands of Hathor Maat, but who knew how long that would last? And how long did he have before their rebellion spread to the rest of his anatomy?

Not long, but maybe just long enough.

This deep in the Black Ship, the wards graven into its walls and deck were brutally direct. None so potent as to keep a sorcerer of the Thousand Sons from his powers, but enough to contain the vessel's psychic misery.

This ventral transitway ran arrow-straight for a kilometre, its length partially lit with stuttering lumen strips. Warded cells were sealed with roller shutters on either side, bearing the ship's living cargo of witches, mutants and warlocks. Tolbek wanted to vent them all into the void, but Ahriman believed a use might yet be found for them.

Of course, Ahriman's star had fallen since the debacle on the prison orbital. Dozens of their cabal were dead and all they had to show for it was a remembrancer of only fractional power. The primarch's scribe remained lost, and Ahriman had even managed to lose his former neophyte to the Wolves.

The Chief Librarian was seldom given to outbursts of fury, but he had raged for days following their silent escape aboard the Black Ship. He had been so utterly *certain* one of the shards they sought was within Kamiti Sona.

Sequestered with Aforgomon and the *Book of Magnus* these last four days, Ahriman sought to divine where they would sail next. And while the cabal waited, Hathor Maat's flesh plotted against him.

He followed the transitway, marking the angular cyphers chalked on the cell shutters. Words held power, a fact well known to the Silent Sisterhood, hence the use of primitive pictographics to designate threat levels, psy-grades, current occupation levels and projected survival rates.

Halfway along its length, Hathor Maat came to a battered roller shutter upon which were sketched the precise combination of symbols he sought, an arrangement indicating this hold contained dangerous mutants. He rose to the fourth enumeration, spotting fresh-cut sigils at the bottom corner of the door, all but obscured by the lip of the shutter runners.

'Thothmes,' he said, intrigued.

He tested the chain mechanism, and wasn't surprised when the shutter clattered upwards. A wave of psychic pain gusted out, and Hathor Maat recoiled at the fetor of human waste and lunacy. Reluctantly, he hauled the shutter fully open.

The cargo hold was dark, the fitful light of the transitway illuminating only the first ten metres. Beyond that, the darkness was a solid thing, a wall of jet that allowed nothing to penetrate. Perhaps ninety mortals swathed in long shawls crouched against the walls, keeping their eyes averted as he entered. Their body language spoke of abject subservience.

Hathor Maat glanced down at the threshold, seeing more of Master Thothmes' warding sigils, this time made with no attempt of concealment.

'Someone doesn't want anyone else to know what's going on in here,' he said, his voice loud enough to echo. 'Why is that?'

A figure stepped into the light, a swordsman with frost-white hair and a face Hathor Maat had made beautiful.

'Lucius,' said Hathor Maat. 'Why did you bring me here?'

'You'll see,' said Lucius. 'I promise you'll like it.'

'I know *you* didn't mark the Symbol of Thothmes,' said Hathor Maat, extending his senses, but finding only more pain, more anguish. 'So who else is here?'

'One who can help you,' said Aforgomon, emerging from the darkness. The prisoners pressed themselves tighter to the walls at its appearance. Lucius grinned at their terror, and not even Fulgrim's likeness could hide the foulness within.

'Help me with what?'

'Come,' said Aforgomon, drawing closer. ***'No one can hear us in here. You need not hide your condition.'***

'I have no *condition.*'

As the light touched Aforgomon, Hathor Maat saw its enamelled body was cut with new markings: stars of overlaid arrows, serpentine coils that beguiled the eye and formulae composed entirely of irrational numbers. The aether-fire burning in its ovoid skull flickered, as though distorted in a cracked lens.

'You know, for a moment I could have sworn I saw two flames burning within that head of yours.'

'You are mistaken,' said Aforgomon.

'And you are lying.'

'So are you.'

Hathor Maat turned on his heel. 'No, I am leaving.'

'Wait,' said Lucius, reaching down and hauling a terrified young man in rags from the ground. 'Hear the thing out. I've seen what it can do and it's impressive.'

Hathor Maat turned and gave the swordsman a pitying glance.

'Are you now this thing's errand boy?' he asked, grinning as he saw Lucius' eyes darken. The adolescent held by the swordsman was handsome for a mortal, whimpering as the swordsman's grip on his neck tightened.

'You did me a service,' said Lucius. 'I return the favour.'

'How?'

'Watch,' said Lucius, tearing the tattered rags from the prisoner and passing him to Aforgomon. 'Then decide if you want to leave.'

Hathor Maat grimaced as he saw the young man's beauty was a lie. His body was rank with knotted lumps of gristle and bulging growths, symptoms of some mortal affliction.

Then one of the lumps moved.

A malformed head lifted from the boy's chest, its rheumy eyes rolling blindly in distended sockets as other growths were revealed to be malformed limbs or sensory organs in partially realised stages of unnatural evolution.

Aforgomon slid its metalled hands over the boy's outgrowths, as though reading his life in the texture of his flesh.

'This is Doryan,' said the daemon, pressing a hand to the boy's undulant stomach. ***'On the thirteenth anniversary of his being into existence, he began to hear the thoughts of those around him. At first it was a trickle of whispers – a stray thought here, a powerful desire there – but soon it grew to a deafening torrent.'***

The daemon cupped its hands over the boy's ears.

'Can you imagine hearing every inane thought and babbling inconsequence that passes through mortals' stupid heads? Poor Doryan had never even heard of the Athanaean Fellowship, no way to know what was happening to him. I think it drove him a little bit insane, but who can tell in mortals? And the more

he heard, the more his body transformed until he couldn't hide what was happening any more. His people feared his power, of course, and set the witch-seekers on him. By the time the Silent Sisterhood found him, he had become quite the freak.'

'It would have been a mercy to end him in the womb,' said Hathor Maat, revolted by the boy's deformities. 'Only misery awaits such monsters, for them and those that sire them.'

'Perhaps,' said the daemon, ***'but it does not have to be so.'***

Aforgomon plunged a hand deep into the boy's stomach, churning its fist within his flesh. The boy screamed and tried to pull away, but the daemon held him firm. Raw power flowed from Aforgomon, and as it went deep into the boy's marrow it undid the horrors of his flesh.

One by one, the hideous growths and grotesque aberrations receded, leaving the boy unblemished by mutation.

Yet this was not a cure without cost.

The boy was unsullied by deformity, but he was no longer young or beautiful. Now he was ancient and withered, his flesh whole, but his life drained to the instant before his death. Aforgomon released his grip, and the skeletal figure fell to the deck, all life absent.

'Ahriman promises he can stop the flesh change, but he lies,' said Aforgomon. ***'I can do what he will not.'***

Hathor Maat laughed and pointed to the withered corpse.

'That is no cure,' he said. 'I will find my own way.'

'This?' said Aforgomon. ***'This was simply to demonstrate my power. I can show you how to use mortals as homunculi, living repositories into which you can pour the horrors of the flesh change. My knowledge can make you whole again.'***

'And what will this knowledge cost me?' asked Hathor Maat.

'Only a very small thing,' promised Aforgomon.

They held Menkaura in the least of the *Arethusa*'s embarkation decks. Naked but for a plain training robe, his muscle-corded limbs were outstretched and fettered by bow-taut adamantium chains bolted to a pair of mooring rings rated to anchor superheavy battle tanks. A dozen more chains were attached to a ward-inscribed null-collar locked around his neck.

Sister Caesaria lifted a sensory-deprivation helm from Menkaura and took position behind him, her melta pistol aimed at the back of his skull. A circle of Vorax powered up lightning guns and beat the flats of their powerblades on their thorax sections. Servo-skulls flitted overhead, capturing everything via picters and vox-thieves.

The sorcerer blinked rapidly, squinting in the glare of blinding stablights. He let out a pained breath as Caesaria's pariah energies snuffed out his powers.

Promus and Bjarki watched the sorcerer take in his surroundings: the spartan embarkation deck, its automated weapon systems and the Vorax. Menkaura tutted as he noticed the ring of bird skulls, animal bones, furred totems and tribal fetishes Bjarki had laid around his feet.

'*Really?*' he said.

'Just being thorough,' said Bjarki with a wet growl.

Menkaura tried to face Sister Caesaria, but the collar and chains prevented him from looking over his shoulder.

'Her mutation blocks your connection to the Great Ocean as much as it does mine,' he said, 'but given what we must talk about, that is probably for the best.'

'Why were the Thousand Sons on Kamiti Sona?' said Promus.

Menkaura studied him, and even though the sorcerer's power was blunted, Promus felt his skin crawl at the intensity of the scrutiny. He expected to feel hate or the urge to wreak vengeance on Bjarki, but Menkaura appeared utterly calm.

'Straight up and down, no embellishment, direct and blandly efficient like all in the Thirteenth,' said Menkaura. 'Tell me, Chief Librarian Promus – why have you forsaken the Primarch Guilliman's colours? And you, Bödvar Bjarki, Rune Priest of Tra, how does it feel to know you will never see Fenris again?'

'How does he know you both?' demanded Caesaria.

'He is one of their gothi,' said Bjarki. 'A reader of the unlived wyrd.'

'We call ourselves Corvidae,' said Menkaura.

'But that's not how he knows me,' said Promus, and Bjarki favoured him with a gaze that reminded him of the Wolves' sometime-role as executioners.

'You didn't tell them you were at Nikaea?' said Menkaura with a wide grin. 'You haven't told them you spoke in defence of the Crimson King?'

Bjarki turned to him. 'Is that true?'

Promus nodded. 'It is.'

'Yes, Promus here stood with Targutai Yesugei of the White Scars and his brothers of the Librarius,' said Menkaura, enjoying his moment of revelation. 'It filled me with pride to hear you all speak out against our censure.'

'Do I need to chain you next to him?' said Bjarki.

'You could try.'

Bjarki stared into Promus' eyes, and Promus met his flinty gaze. The moment stretched until the Wolf nodded slowly.

'You have recognised your failing and made sure to correct it. And Magnus fooled a great many people cleverer than you.'

Promus tried not to take offence at Bjarki's casual dismissal, and turned back to Menkaura.

‘Why were the Thousand Sons on Kamiti Sona?’ said Promus.

Menkaura sighed and shook his head.

‘Answer him,’ snarled Bjarki, stepping close and slamming his fist into Menkaura’s face.

Bone cracked. Teeth flew and bounced on the deck.

Menkaura gagged and spat a wad of blood.

‘If you are going to ask questions to which you already know the answer, then your wolf is going to kill me before you learn what you need.’

‘Answer the question,’ said Promus.

‘For the same reason as you,’ snapped Menkaura. ‘To find Mahavastu Kallimakus, the former scribe of Magnus the Red.’

‘Why?’ asked Promus.

Menkaura tilted his head to the side, his eyes moving from Promus to Bjarki.

‘You don’t know yet…’ said Menkaura to himself.

‘Know what?’ said Bjarki.

‘Tell me, Master Promus, why were *you* there?’

‘To stop you.’

Menkaura gave a bitter laugh, the sound incongruous from one bound by chains and psychic wards.

‘You don’t know anything, do you?’ he said. ‘You were there because you were told to go there, not because you actually knew why. Don’t you know that *why* is always the most important question to ask? What, when, how – just window dressing. *Why* is always the question you should be asking.’

The sorcerer turned his gaze on Bjarki.

‘Tell me, Rune Priest, do you even know *why* you were sent to Prospero? Do you truly know *why* you murdered my Legion?’

Now Promus saw genuine emotion rise in Menkaura. Veiled by a mind consumed by thoughts of potential futures, yet there just the same. But it wasn’t hatred, only the frustration of a master whose student fails to grasp a seemingly obvious point.

‘Maleficarum,’ said Bjarki.

‘That’s it?’ spat Menkaura, when Bjarki didn’t go on. ‘That’s your reasoning for burning a world and murdering its entire population? One word?’

‘That’s always been *your* Legion’s problem,’ said Bjarki. ‘Too many words.’

Menkaura looked to Promus, as if expecting to find him just as incredulous at Bjarki’s rationale for the wholesale extermination of a planetary population.

‘You want more?’ said Promus. ‘I understand that. I too need to have reasons for why things happen, so I will play the role of the orator this once. I will tell you the real reason you died. You died because your master broke his oath to the

Emperor and expected no one to care. Your lord and master looked his sire in the eye and lied to Him. To all of us.'

Promus turned to Bjarki and said, 'And do you know why? Can you guess the reason he gave, the excuse? Bear in mind he did not pretend he hadn't delved into the forbidden places. No, he proudly stood by what he had done, and said, "It's all right, it's all perfectly fine – *I know best.*" That's his rationale. That's his excuse. That he *knows best.*

'He knows best because he is so sophisticated, so mentally advanced, so wise in the complex, cosmological minutiae of the subtle arts. He knows best because he is more enlightened and we are too unevolved to recognise the truth. We don't see the universe the way he does, we don't appreciate its detail. We are too stupid to understand the bigger picture.'

Promus stepped away, spreading his arms in a gesture of false humility and faux magnanimity.

'But it is all right. *He knows best.* He knows *better.* He will do the knowing *for* us, and we will just have to trust he has the truth of it. So what he is ultimately saying is: I know better than anyone, even the Emperor. The Emperor who told him to stop. He forbade Magnus, but Magnus knows *better.*'

Pausing in his recitation, Promus lowered his head and slowly nodded. 'And the worst of it is, he might. Magnus *might* actually know better. After all, it is said he was birthed to see further than any of us. But our faith is in the Emperor who made us and whose power dwarfs all others. He understands the dark and infernal and *eternal* magnitude of the warp, and if He says there are places He is unwilling to risk going and steps He is unwilling to risk taking, then that ought to be good enough for us. For *all* of us.'

Promus glanced over at Bjarki, and was surprised to see a look of genuine regret there. The Wolves were the Emperor's red right hand – monsters in their own way – but how easy it was to only see the savage, to fear the axe and miss the subtle knife.

'Did you not stop to think that maybe there could be something *else* out there?' asked Promus, and his question was not rhetorical. He truly wanted an answer.

'Didn't you imagine there could be some… *maleficarum* out in the lightless, insane folds of the warp? Something watching you and whispering, "That's right, keep dabbling. Keep thinking you're in full control… Keep believing *you know best.*"'

Promus felt his fists clench and release in time with the tempo of his heartbeat.

'The Fifteenth played with fire, and did not care that it was not just them who would be burned. You were instructed. You were warned. You were forbidden. You did not listen and you never would. So you needed to be put down. You needed to be saved from yourselves.'

Promus turned to Bjarki, who looked upon him with new eyes.

‘And if action needed to be taken against a Legion on that kind of scale, it had to be undertaken by the purest, deadliest force in our arsenal. It had to be a quick, clean, *total* kill – a blow made by the sharpest weapon in the surest arm, driven by ruthless intent and the most fearless heart. Killing a Legion is no small thing – it needs executioners that will never flinch or hesitate, and never, ever let doubt stay their hand.

‘That is *why* the Sixth was loosed,’ said Promus, stepping away from the seer. ‘That is *why* you died.’

Menkaura shook his head slowly.

‘You do not see just how badly you were all deceived,’ he said, his face etched with the grief of missed opportunities. ‘What the Crimson King hoped to achieve was for all humanity. He wanted to lift mortal gaze from the shadows dancing on the cave walls, to show them all that he could see, to know the things he knew. Such blood from misunderstanding. Could it ever have been different, I wonder?’

‘Wyrd bears us where it will,’ said Bjarki, surprising Promus by approaching their captive to place a hand on Menkaura’s shoulder. ‘The deeds of mighty heroes may sometimes shape it a little, but the rest of us? We are swirling leaves borne in their wake. And those who can glimpse wyrd are blessed and cursed to know it is beyond their power to change.’

‘I do not accept that,’ said Menkaura. ‘To know the future is to be given the power to change it.’

‘To change it means it will never *become* the future, so what have you really seen?’ said Bjarki. ‘Fenris teaches us that no future is set. Strong lands with deep roots sink beneath the ocean while spits of rock, barely tied to the world at all, endure for a hundred Great Years. All we can see are warnings, paths of darkness best avoided. So you tell me, Menkaura of Prospero, the sight of what path brought you to Kamiti Sona?’

Menkaura sighed. ‘The Corvidae teach that all fates are possible, that every action is a ripple in a vast river. But even a ripple has the power to change the river’s course over time. That is why I came to you.’

‘Came to us?’ said Promus. ‘You were captured.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Menkaura. ‘Because it is my hope that this ripple will be the one to change the river’s course. You wish to know why we came to Kamiti Sona? I will tell you what you need to hear, what I have seen and what I have kept even from my brothers.’

‘Tell us what?’ said Promus.

‘That you were right to raze Prospero,’ said Menkaura. ‘You just did it for the wrong reason. You attacked Magnus for what he had *done,* but you should have killed him for what he *will do.*’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When Russ broke Magnus across his knee, he wounded him more deeply than any of us suspected. My father’s soul was broken into shards and scattered through the cosmos. Ahzek Ahriman seeks to reunite those shards and restore our primarch to his former glory, but I have seen what the Crimson King will become if that happens…’

‘What will he become?’ said Bjarki.

‘A vast and terrible thing,’ said Menkaura, speaking with fervent urgency, as though his time grew short. ‘More powerful than you can possibly imagine, and whatever good remains in the Thousand Sons will fall to ashes and dust in the fires of his rebirth. He will rise atop a dark pyramid of smoked glass and clockwork gold, and all within the Great Ocean will be his to command. But this new Magnus will make his choice between darkness and light shorn of conscience or compassion.’

‘Why are you telling us this?’ said Promus.

‘Because you have to stop it,’ said Menkaura.

Soot-black smog painted the horizon. Toxic petrocarbons and chemical vapour burned throats and blinded eyes. Nothing human could breathe this poisonous fog and live. The defenders had burned their own refinery fields rather than have them fall to the Imperial forces.

Titans burned in the flames, towering statues melting in the awful heat as seismic mines ruptured subterranean promethium vaults. She felt the pain and terror of their crews, burning to death in upright coffins with no hope of escape.

Giant fuel lines buckled and split, spewing millions of litres of flammable compounds. Fuel silos exploded in roaring mushroom clouds. Armoured vehicles, their tracks melting in the heat, blundered between the flaming structures, seeking an exit, yet finding nothing but fire and death. Winged lancers dragged down by sucking thermals corkscrewed through the wreckage, red engines detonating like airbursting phosphex bombs.

Camille slid through the tar-thick air like a ghost, feeling the heat and tasting the caustic air, but untouched by it.

Horror surrounded her, and she wept at what she saw.

Soldiers ablaze from head to toe, armour fused to their bodies, flesh running like wax, bones snapping in the heat. Ten thousand men and women reduced to chemical ash in a single, searing breath.

Then, mercifully, the infernal carnage receded as she rose high above the refinery fields – thousands of square kilometres of drilling derricks, snaking pipeways, pump stations and fuel silos. A sea of smoke and flame like a gateway to the hell of the ancients.

Camille usually recognised echoes of the places she saw, for she would most often use her powers standing amid their ruins, but this place was new and unknown to her.

Camille's psychometric gift had served her well as an archaeo-historian in service to the Remembrancer Order. It had allowed her to touch unearthed artefacts and experience the lives of those who had once held them, reading the lingering psychic impressions they left.

She only ever risked holding domestic items – pots, clothing, artisans' tools or suchlike. Never weapons or things with bloody memories, never things that had known terror.

The length of golden chain resting in her palms had seemed innocuous enough, but the look in Ahriman's eyes warned her that what she saw would be painful. The monstrous tome to which the chain was attached was known to her, a damned grimoire that Mahavastu Kallimakus had been used like a marionette to write.

The *Book of Magnus*.

'Find him,' said Ahriman, and she knew exactly who he meant.

She flew from the blazing refinery fields, borne by memory's wings over a landscape carved by the passage of living history. A landscape dominated by warfare and scarred by millennia of bloodletting.

Camped beyond the fires, beneath innumerable eagle-and-lightning banners, she saw scores of Army regiments in strangely archaic armour. Swooping gunships knifed the air, artfully crafted raptor-forms with arrowhead prows and bladed wings that spun around their tail-sections.

Everything was hazed with distance and time.

This could be any world in the Imperium, but Camille knew with complete certainty that she witnessed a memory of Terra.

Camille didn't know where or when this was. The landmarks were unfamiliar and the terrain very different to the lands of her birth. Corrugated folds of dusty mountains ridged the south and polluted bands of slurry that might once have been great lakes or distant oceans banded the eastern and northern horizons.

She flew towards the mountains, losing height and swooping down a cleft between peaks that looked to have been carved by some vast impact from on high. Exposed rock that had last seen the sky millions of years ago glittered with sedimentary bands and Camille's heart beat faster as she saw her destination.

A cave mouth high on a narrow plateau.

No, not a cave mouth, for its entrance was unmistakably a trilithon doorway: two vertical slabs of rock with a third set atop them as a lintel.

Camille flew down the throat of the mountain, along ashlar passageways and wider galleries hung with caged lumens. She saw chambers ringed with offering

bowls and alcoves of statues. Too fast to study, as though this memory grew ever more impatient to reveal its purpose.

Was this a tomb? A reliquary exposed by orbital shelling?

She flew into a wide, high-roofed cave that housed towering statues of jade and gold with moonstone eyes pupilled with obsidian. On she went, beyond even these cyclopean guardians, flying ever downwards, plunging into the heart of the mountain, only halting her headlong descent in its farthest chamber – a hexagonal library with all but one of its walls lined with bookshelves.

A circular desk sat at the exact centre of the chamber, piled high with open books. A man read with his back to her, robed in gold-edged crimson and with a weave of silver scale mantling his shoulders like snow on a mountaintop.

He turned to look up at her and she saw his face was dusky and handsomely regal, framed by lustrous dark hair worn long to the centre of his back. His beard was trimmed close to his jaw except at the chin where it was bound by three copper rings and hung down over the book he read.

'Mistress Shivani,' *he said.* 'Welcome to the Library of Kadmus.'

The flambeaux burned low in Lady Veleda's staterooms, enfolding everything in velvet darkness. Incense smouldered in wooden bowls, and the incongruous sound of water tumbling over rocks issued from unseen vox-speakers.

Enormous rugs patterned with repeating geometries and looping spirals hung on the walls and were spread across the floor. Ancient grimoires filled shadowed bookshelves alongside disquieting statuary of a queerish green soapstone.

Lemuel recognised the mystical aesthetic. He had visited hundreds of similarly appointed parlours in his doomed quest to find esoteric means to save his wife. Most were home to charlatans or madmen, and he wasn't yet sure which category suited Lady Veleda best.

She was a wizened, compact dwarf, and the furniture spread throughout her staterooms matched her scale, which only served to heighten the contrast between her and the inhumanly large ogre looming at the back of the room.

It stood with titanic arms crossed over its muscled chest, like a war-god in a pagan temple. Lemuel had seen such grunting abhumans before, but never this close. The powerful, livestock reek of its oily sweat was all but overpowering.

'Jambik Sosruko the first migou you see?' said Lady Veleda, seated cross-legged at a pair of low tables carved from deep red wood. Her voice was heavily accented and impossibly deep for someone so small.

A memory tugged at Lemuel, but he pushed it aside for now.

'No,' he said. 'I saw gangs of them hauling girders or breaking rocks in the labour camps around the Emperor's Palace, but he's the biggest I've seen.'

'My son biggest anyone *ever* seen,' she said.

‘Your… *son?*’ said Lemuel, almost unable to say the word for the knife of guilt it bore.

‘Adopted son,’ grinned Lady Veleda with a glint of mischief in her eyes. ‘He born in avalanche when mountains of Sagamartha and Annapurna collide many of world’s ages ago to lift Himalazia into sky for Emperor.’

‘Just as well,’ said Olgyr Widdowsyn, lounging by the stateroom doors. The Wolf was now Lemuel’s constant companion, an arrangement neither entirely enjoyed. ‘I know only a little of mortal women, but even I know *dverger* does not give birth to *Jötunn* and live.’

‘Be mindful, Olgyr of Balt,’ warned Lady Veleda, without looking up. ‘My cards listen. Careful I not put bale-eye on you.’

‘Cartomancy,’ spat Widdowsyn, reaching up to touch a furred paw-talisman hung at his pauldron. ‘The Night Haunter is said to put his faith in such things.’

‘So does Sigillite,’ said Lady Veleda. ‘Doubt him too?’

Widdowsyn didn’t answer and returned his gaze to Jambik Sosruko, perhaps trying to imagine what it might be like to fight him.

‘Sit, Master Gaumon,’ she said, gesturing to one table, upon which were three delicate porcelain cups and a teapot of exquisite manufacture that vented fragrant vapour. ‘You want drink?’

‘No, thank you,’ said Lemuel.

‘Sure? Master Nagasena lend me his prized set for tea. Be shame not to use them.’

‘I’m sure, thank you.’

Lady Veleda shrugged, dealing worn cards with turned-up edges on the empty table. ‘Come, we speak, let cards listen.’

Lemuel lowered himself to the thick rugs, trying to get comfortable at so low a table. The metallic struts scaffolding his newly set legs and the loss of his arm made that difficult. Balms had dulled the edges of his pain and remorse, but both were still there, gnawing at the fringes of his awareness.

Lady Veleda spread a fresh dealing of cards on the empty table between them, and Lemuel saw numerous familiar images: a lightning-struck tower, a king, a knave, a wizard. A skeletal reaper leered at him before it was returned to her hand along with all the others.

‘You see a deck like this before, though?’ said Lady Veleda.

‘Ahriman had one,’ said Lemuel. ‘He called it a *Visconti-Sforza trionfi* deck. I had the feeling it was unique.’

‘It was,’ she said with a nod. ‘A devil’s picture book, made for men with gold and power. This is de Gébelin’s deck, a magician of second century. He believed images on cards were crafted by ancient priests of Gyptus from *Book of Thoth.*’

‘I searched for that book once,’ said Lemuel.

‘Better for you, I think, to not find it.’

Another hand was dealt, and Lady Veleda’s eyes scanned the cards quickly. She shook her head and sorted the cards back into the deck.

‘Catheric lords of Romanii brought cards to land of Franc, where de Gébelin first learned of them. He thought them divine and wrote of them in *Monde Primitif,* a book once lost in fires of Cardinal Tang.’

‘*Once* lost?’

‘Rediscovered by Thousand Sons in ruins of Akkad.’

‘Then it should be burned again,’ said Widdowsyn, taking a step into the room. Jambik Sosruko grumbled and Lemuel felt the bass of it vibrate his spine.

Lady Veleda ignored him. ‘De Gébelin discovered mystical connection between twenty-one trionfi and the fool with twenty-two letters of ancient language of angels.’

‘Enochian,’ said Lemuel. ‘I read it in the *Liber Loagaeth.*’

‘Not *Claves Angelicae?*’

‘I never found a copy.’

Lady Veleda nodded towards the bookshelves.

‘Read mine.’

Lemuel’s jaw fell open and he tried to stand, but Olgyr Widdowsyn’s hand clamped down on his shoulder. He hadn’t even felt the Wolf move.

‘No books.’

‘But–’

‘*No books,*’ repeated Widdowsyn, increasing the pressure on Lemuel’s collarbone just enough to hurt. Lemuel put up his hands.

‘Fine, no books.’

Widdowsyn’s intervention reminded Lemuel he was alive under sufferance, a prisoner in all but name. Lady Veleda shrugged and continued dealing cards as though nothing had happened.

‘Soon, a faceless fortune-teller called Etteilla learns last secrets of cards – how to make them talk, but more important, he learns to make them *listen.*’

‘Cards do not listen,’ said Lemuel.

‘No?’ said Lady Veleda, dealing another eight cards, seven face down, one face up. ‘They already listen to you. Look.’

Lemuel rubbed his bruised shoulder and looked down at the topmost card. The image was unknown to any deck he’d previously encountered, but he knew it just the same: a towering mountain of dusty yellow stone, its summit piercing the clouds of a blazing, umber sky.

‘The Mountain that Eats Men,’ he said.

FOURTEEN

The quest
Sorrows to spare
The mountain

How long had it been?

The horologs had been the first system to fail. Amon no longer knew how long he had followed his father's trail across the Planet of the Sorcerers. Years, if the wheezing of his armour's servos and the rust eating its plates was any guide.

Or had he only recently set out from the ruins of the Obsidian Tower?

Time moved strangely within the Great Ocean, and many were the tales of travellers undone by its temporal chaos. Some flew its tides for a day only to return and find the empires they once knew had gone to dust. Others emerged centuries before their birth, strangers in lands once familiar.

Dust-stiffened rags swathed the remains of Amon's armour, fluttering in frozen winds as he left the ruins of Gnoph-Keh's crystalline cathedral behind.

Magnus had passed this way, lost and alone.

And where the Crimson King trod, miracles followed.

Everywhere Magnus worked his wonders, the aetheric winds carried rumour of them to those with the wit to hear it. Amon had followed every such rumour, tormented by the pain of his ruined body and the guilt of knowing his father had fallen to madness because of him.

In his seemingly endless quest, Amon had seen great and terrible things, witnessed the sins of the past and the future's many dooms. He saw ghosts of heroism unmatched and suffered the echoes of deeds too terrible to imagine. He fought countless battles, defeated hosts of monsters, but remained always two steps behind the Crimson King.

In his darker moments, Amon almost believed his father did not *want* to be found. Every time such disloyal thoughts rose from the abyssal depths of his mind, despair took him until some fresh rumour lured him onwards with the promise of finally locating the primarch.

Such a rumour had muttered of Gnoph-Keh, a minor Pavoni known to possess only limited grasp of his Fellowship's artes. The aether winds whispered of how he had raised tens of thousands of ancient crystal corpses to craft a titanic ossuary of gleaming glass. They spoke of him waging war against his Prosperine brothers with an invincible army of *yhetees* wrought from ice and breath.

Trying not to let hope blind him to the likely falsehood of this latest rumour, Amon bade his Stormbird follow the muttering winds to its source. Like him, the gunship had changed greatly in these strange times, its silhouette slowly assuming a more hawk-like aspect, its mien transforming from screaming raptor to patient hunter.

As soon as he had laid eyes upon the crystalline ossuary, Amon recognised his father's aether-craft. The Crimson King's power bled from every reflection and star-bright pinpoint of light.

Gnoph-Keh barred its gates against him, so Amon summoned his awesome power and proceeded to demolish the crystal ossuary piece by piece. A thousands-strong host of ice-born yhetees sallied forth from the splintering fortress, but they were crudely made things and insultingly easy to destroy. The will animating them was weak and Amon easily unravelled the raptures that gave them life.

He had marched through the dissipating host, limping towards a tower of purest sapphire. Gnoph-Keh tried to fight, but against an adept of Amon's skill and cunning, it was a gesture of defiance, nothing more.

With Amon's ritual dagger at his throat, Gnoph-Keh's valediction had been to speak of encountering a red-robed magus whose face was hidden behind a shimmering veil. The magus bore a silver key on a broken chain and his power was clearly immense, but he knew neither his name nor from whence he had come.

Gnoph-Keh wept as he told Amon how he had spun lies of brotherhood to keep the nameless magus at his side long enough to learn the secrets of his power.

'You are a blind fool and you learned nothing,' Amon had told Gnoph-Keh, plunging the dagger deep into the meat of the Pavoni's throat. 'You stood at the side of a god, and still I unmade your raptures in the blink of an eye.'

'Who was he?' Gnoph-Keh begged of him, each word drawing a fresh squirt of blood around the blade twisting in his neck. 'I must know.'

'He who is father to us all,' said Amon.

'No!' cried Gnoph-Keh, coughing a frothed wad of gloss-red sputum. 'I am his son… I would have known him…'

'He does not even know himself,' said Amon, gripping the hilt of the athame tighter. 'And you are no son of Magnus.'

'Wait…' begged Gnoph-Keh. 'He is still here…'

'Where?' demanded Amon, easing pressure on the blade.

'He… went… deeper into the vale…' said Gnoph-Keh, bending his dismal artes to halting the tide of blood pouring from his neck. 'Following… the river of stars…'

Amon did not give Gnoph-Keh a chance to undo the damage and sawed his blade down hard, cutting his neck open to the bone.

He left the corpse for the many-eyed worms already wriggling from the earth and the manta-creatures circling overhead. Gnoph-Keh had been a worthless adept in life, but his corpse was saturated in aetheric energy, and such meat was a rarity.

Beyond the shattered ossuary, Amon followed the vale's twisting path, plunging ever deeper into an icy labyrinth of moaning glaciers and frozen gorges that echoed to wendigo howls.

He tasted the raw energy of the Great Ocean, flowing from the secret heart of the mountains in an invisible river. It glittered behind his eyes, and he well understood why Magnus might seek to follow it to the source.

He limped painfully into the soaring peaks without pause, travelling for what felt like many days. He climbed beyond the clouds until the pain in his spine became so great he could only crawl on bloodied palms and aching bones. He kept going until he could go no farther.

And just as he contemplated turning back, he arrived at a frozen plateau of liminal space, where the barriers between worlds was whisper-thin. Its glassy surface was littered with toppled megaliths and carved with colossal geometric designs like those of the ancient Nazcans, dead men who unwisely sought to draw the eye of the gods upon them.

A river that glittered with the light of stars foamed up from the ruins of what had once been a vast palace that looked hauntingly familiar. The impossible passage of non-time had transformed it to little more than crumbling outlines of its once great halls and mighty colonnades. The river flowed along the geometric channels, here fast-flowing, there meandering languidly, sometimes pooling in small lakes or rushing in torrents around broken stonework.

Could Magnus be here?

Amon climbed painfully to his feet, letting the potency of the air fill his lungs. He limped over the plateau, feeling as though each bend in the path might carry him somewhere new, somewhere beyond his comprehension. Ghosts of other worlds hovered tantalisingly at the edge of sight, a million vistas of times and places unknown. A single misstep might carry him beyond anything he had ever experienced.

Who was to say he had not already made that step?

'I seek Magnus the Red!' he shouted, and the echoes slipped into the cracks between worlds. Who knew to where they might travel or who might hear them and what they might do with them? Entire religions had been built on far less, and the thought of what he might be causing with careless words in so powerful a place kept him silent.

Instead, he focused on his feet, watching them rise and fall. His left twisted, his right sure and firm. He saw his reflection in the ice. Decades spent in search of his father had left him a gaunt revenant of the warrior he had been, hollowed out and all but hopeless.

Decades? More like centuries…

A thin wailing sound drifted on the wind – a lamentation?

Amon looked up to see a group of pall-bearers emerge from the ruined palace. Hooded in dust-shawled mourning robes of crimson, they bore a great bier of shields upon their shoulders. Seven to each side and one leading their grief-stricken passage.

They followed the course of the river, their leader reading aloud from an enormous book that drifted in the air before him, the pages turning of their own volition. Guilt followed in a pall of aether ghosts, and as Amon struggled onwards, the agony of his injuries surged with fresh spite.

The mourners stopped at a churning bend in the river, where it foamed with veiled mists. Other lands and other times shimmered in the spume, bright places that knew neither war nor suffering.

As he drew nearer, Amon saw the body borne upon the shields was that of a legionary, his armour crimson and ivory. His helm sat on his chest, nestled between his crossed arms.

‘Uthizzar,’ said Amon.

The pall-bearers looked up, and beneath their hoods, Amon saw each wore a variation on the face of the Crimson King. Some were sallow-skinned, others wounded. Some were tattooed, some were branded, but all had their eyes gouged from their sockets as punishment for this murder. They turned their blind faces towards him as Amon reached their leader and pulled back his hood.

The breath caught in Amon’s throat.

The Crimson King stared back at him. Not an aspect or a shard, but the primarch himself. Yet Amon saw no acknowledgement in his father’s eyes, only horror.

The primarch’s hair was wild and matted like that of a savage, his skin sapped of all vitality by loss. He alone of these aspects retained his eye, and he fixed it upon Amon with such venom that it took the equerry’s breath away.

‘Father…’ he began.

‘You!’ snapped Magnus, jabbing him in the chest. ‘A Knight of Magnus! You, who thought yourselves gods! You, who promised enlightenment, but brought only death and darkness! What arrogance! What hubris! How dare you put yourselves above all others?’

‘No,’ said Amon. ‘That is not what–’

‘I failed,’ said Magnus, his anger replaced with soul-deep weariness. ‘I reached too far and did not heed the warnings of those who knew better. I doomed us all.’

‘My lord!’ cried Amon as the mourners lifted the bier of shields from their shoulders, ready to let the body of Baleq Uthizzar slide into the river.

‘I am no lord,’ said Magnus, sinking to his knees at the water’s edge. ‘I think perhaps I was once a man of worth, but now I am nothing.’

‘No!’ cried Amon, keeling beside his father. ‘You are Magnus the Red, primarch of the Thousand Sons. You are the Crimson King, wisest of us all, and we need you more than ever. Come back to us, please!’

Magnus looked him in the eye, and for a fraction of a second it was as if his father stared back at him.

‘He is gone,’ said Magnus. ‘We will all be gone soon, and the universe will be well rid of us.’

The mourners released the bier, and it carried Uthizzar’s body into the river. The water claimed its prize, and Amon watched as swirling tides drew it down to unknown depths.

‘I killed him,’ said Magnus. ‘Just as I killed all my sons.’

‘No,’ said Amon. ‘Only you can save them.’

‘Once maybe,’ said Magnus. ‘That task now falls to another.’

‘Ahriman?’

Magnus stood, but did not answer as the mourners moved to surround Amon. He saw his doom writ upon their sightless faces and tried to stand, but Magnus held him with firm hands upon his shoulders.

‘It is better for us to pass swiftly from this world,’ said Magnus. ‘To slip into oblivion before we wreak more harm upon those we love. It is time for us to die.’

The dust-caked mourners closed in around Amon, taking hold of his arms and neck. He struggled against them, searching for his powers, but finding only a howling void of emptiness.

‘Please, father!’ he yelled. ‘Come back to us!’

And suddenly the river was rushing up to meet him.

It felt like crashing through a wall of ice.

The frozen water hit him like a blow, paralysing his limbs and locking him with a cold that shock-froze his lungs. The currents spun him around, eager to toy with their new plaything. Grasping hands clutched him from below, dragging him down to join the dead.

Amon looked up through the swirling chaos of bubbles and saw his father looking back at him.

And then he saw nothing at all.

Olgyr Widdowsyn came for Lemuel in the darkest part of the *Doramaar’*s night-watch and told him he had to come now. The Wolf did not apologise for the

lateness of the hour, but Lemuel had been awake anyway.

Sleep did not come easily to Lemuel, and when it did it brought nightmares of Kamiti Sona. He dreamed of eyeless things, of tortures and lost friends. But most of all, he dreamed of a young boy whose name he could not remember. A boy who would never grow old, never know love and never, ever let Lemuel forget he was a murderer.

Rubbing his eyes, he awkwardly pulled on a pair of stained fatigues and followed Widdowsyn.

From the crew decks down into the engineering spaces.

Below the waterline and past the reeking bilges.

Through forgotten underdeck transits and dripping conduits stagnant with bad oil, stale air and the incongruous smell of livestock. In moments he was entirely lost, with no idea where they were in the ship.

Widdowsyn responded to none of Lemuel's questions and divulged nothing of their destination, save to say it was time for him to earn his keep.

In the weeks since his session with Lady Veleda, Lemuel had seen no one other than the warriors of the VI Legion. No matter how many times he asked to see Chaiya or Yasu Nagasena, his requests were met with stony silence or curt refusals.

In that time, however, he was visited by each of the Space Wolves in turn. They came whenever it suited them. It made no difference to them whether he was eating or washing, fitfully sleeping or awake.

If they wanted to talk, he was bound to listen.

Each warrior would sit across from him and speak of the brother they had lost on Kamiti Sona. Sometimes these recollections were anecdotes that barely mentioned Harr Balegyr at all. Others were epic recountings of a campaign, complete with every detail from the weather to the circumstances that had brought the Rout – a term Lemuel quickly came to realise was one of the Wolves' names for themselves – to war. Some spoke of Balegyr's strengths, others his weaknesses. They told Lemuel of his trials on Fenris, his tribal customs, his favoured fighting styles, his physical prowess and his utter lack of humour. It seemed, at times, that each Wolf was describing a different man.

When he'd pointed that out to Svafnir Rackwulf, the last of the Wolves to visit him, the warrior shrugged and said, 'Isn't that true of everyone? We all are shaped by how others see us as much as our own character.'

He'd felt irritated by these interruptions, but quickly came to realise this was as close as legionaries came to showing grief before mortals. When the need to unburden themselves came upon them, his concerns were the least of theirs.

Finally, Widdowsyn came to an archway misted with a fine drizzle of moisture at the end of a radial conduit. He ducked underneath, water spattering from the

plates of his armour and soaking the pelt at his shoulder. The darkness beyond swallowed the Wolf, leaving Lemuel alone in the half-light of the echoing conduit. He heard sounds from within, grunts and scrapes of blades being sharpened. Smoke from an open fire leavened the metallic dampness of the air.

Lemuel took a deep breath and tasted death.

He had been waiting for this moment ever since the Space Wolves had boarded the *Cypria Selene* and taken them prisoner. Lemuel risked a glance over his shoulder, knowing he would be overtaken and killed if he tried to flee.

'Once more into the breach,' he said, and closed his eyes.

Lemuel stepped into the dripping arch, sensing this was more than a physical threshold he was crossing.

Through on the other side, he spat a mouthful of chemical-tasting water and blinked. He wiped moisture from his face with his remaining hand, smelling a pungent animal reek of wet fur, raw meat and smoke. Low registers of breath from all around him triggered a prey response. Sweat prickled his forehead.

The scale of the chamber was impossible to guess, but it felt large. Lemuel pictured a great hall, with hand-carved wooden posts supporting blackened beams and a timbered ceiling of thatch from which hung vast tusks and other trophies won from the ocean. Heat assailed him from a low-banked fire that smouldered in a pit with a deep cherry-red glow. Its illumination was fitful, hinting at shapes just beyond its reach.

'You are Lemuel Gaumon of Sangha, seventh-born son of Wekesa and Ekua?' said a voice he recognised as Bjarki's.

'I am,' he said.

The darkness rippled in front of him, and suddenly the Rune Priest was there, towering over him, vast and primal in his pelt-draped armour and wolf-skull headpiece. His eyes glimmered yellow in the gloom. He held a carved drinking horn in one hand, filled with a viscous, acrid-smelling liquid.

'You know why we bring you to our aett?'

'Not really,' confessed Lemuel. 'I thought maybe you were going to kill me, but now I'm not so sure.'

Bjarki grinned, exposing teeth that seemed a lot sharper and more dangerous than before.

'I *want* to kill you,' said Bjarki, revealing a bone-handled knife limned in blueish frost in his other hand. 'But that is not your wyrd.'

'You *should* kill me,' wept Lemuel as guilt welled up from within him. 'Throne, I… I… killed him. I made his *mother* kill him! It's more than I deserve to be knifed in the dark.'

'True,' said Bjarki. 'But that murder was only your first.'

'What? No!' said Lemuel.

‘I see a time when you will be a new man with a new name, one that strikes terror in those who hear it. You will be the death of worlds.’

Lemuel shook his head. ‘No, I could never…’

‘It is your wyrd,’ said Bjarki with a fatalistic shrug as he drew the blade across his palm and let the blood run down his hand. ‘But that is not why you are here.’

‘Then why am I here?’

‘You are a remembrancer, yes?’ said Bjarki, reaching up to smear his red fingertips down Lemuel’s tear-streaked face.

‘I was,’ said Lemuel, biting his lip at the caustic smell and oily texture of the Rune Priest’s blood, dimly aware of sinuous movement in the shadows.

‘Then remember,’ said Bjarki, backing towards the fire.

‘Remember what?’

‘All you have been told,’ said Bjarki, taking a long draught from the drinking horn before tipping the rest over the fire. It roared to life as though doused with promethium, and billowing yellow flames reached to the vaulted roof.

Lemuel shielded his eyes against the furious glare, but in that brief moment of illumination, he saw he was surrounded.

‘Harr Balegyr was my brother,’ said Olgyr Widdowsyn, standing a handspan to his left. ‘Dishonour his memory and I will tear your head from your shoulders.’

‘Harr Balegyr was my brother,’ said Svafnir Rackwulf on his right. ‘Speak ill of his legacy and I will eat your heart.’

‘Harr Balegyr was my brother,’ said Gierlothnir Helblind. ‘Misspeak his deeds and–’

‘You’ll rip out my spine?’ said Lemuel. ‘I welcome it.’

‘I was going to crush your skull, but I like yours better,’ said Helblind with a grin that wasn’t at all reassuring.

‘Let the sending away begin,’ said Bjarki.

Each of the Wolves stepped back, and Lemuel saw why he had been brought here, why the Wolves had brought him their accounts. It hadn’t been to unburden themselves of grief, and he’d been foolish to ascribe so mortal a motive to these transhuman warriors.

The armoured body of Harr Balegyr sat at the far end of the chamber on a high-backed wooden throne. A savage king of battle, mantled in furs and girded for war in frost-grey plate. His war-notched sword lay across his thighs, and despite the cut line across his forehead and the stitching sealing his eyes shut, Lemuel had the strongest sensation he might spring into action at a moment’s notice.

Lemuel closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath.

He began to speak, retelling the tales he had been told, leaving nothing out and giving each warrior’s account of his brother its due time in the light.

He spoke until his throat was in rasping agony, until the sending away was done. It took twelve hours.

With the last tale told, he sank to his knees at the dying fire's embers and looked up to see if he had satisfied his audience or whether they would make good on their threats.

But the chamber was empty.

Seven islands of coalesced matter adrift in the Great Ocean, each linked to the other by arcing webs of lightning. The largest was a vast continental plate, an ashen wasteland with magma rivers and dust-choked ruins of such monumental scale they must once have been inhabited by giants. The smallest was a lightless mansion ripped from its earthly foundations and cast without heed into the tides of the warp.

Others were mountain ranges of fire that extended from the base of rippling lakes of warp-forms. Some appeared to be living creatures, colossal entities whose scale and appearance defied any classification of form. The rest reshaped themselves from moment to moment, the roiling anarchy of their appearance impossible to pin down for more than an instant.

'The Seven Sleepers,' said Aforgomon, standing before the oculus, like a grotesque ringmaster unveiling the latest additions to his freak show. ***'Just as I promised.'***

Ahriman fought to hold his temper in check, something that had become ever more challenging on the aether-nulled *Osiris Panthea.* Just being aboard the Black Ship chafed his every nerve and turned any brotherly utterance into a mortal insult. Tolbek and Kiu had already come to blows, and many others were on the verge of violence.

Every starfarer knew each ship had a unique aspect, a character all its own. Some vessels were vainglorious, others steadfast or imbued with reckless aggression to match their past captains.

But the *Osiris Panthea* carried shame at its heart.

In another age it would have been designated a Guineaman, a slave ship bearing unwilling souls into unending servitude in foreign lands. The nature of the cargo might have changed, psykers doomed to an agonising fate in the name of the Imperium instead of labourers worked to death in its countless manufactories, but the end result was the same.

The *Osiris Panthea* knew it had been crafted for an ignoble purpose, and centuries of anguished guilt saturated its bones. Its every system was truculent and morbidly resistant, especially to those touched by the power of the Great Ocean.

Muttering voices lingered in its empty transitways and half-glimpsed phantoms spied from the shadows of every deck. Such things should have been impossible

on a vessel so heavily warded, but every man in their reduced company knew better.

Ahriman had sensed ghosts at his shoulder ever since they'd escaped Kamiti Sona. He felt the silent accusations of those he'd sought to save from the flesh change as they died in his fire. Worse, their numbers were legion, far more than had ever gone to ash and dust in his tower.

He tried not to think what that might mean, and for once was glad his Corvidae seersight was in decline.

'Ignis?' said Ahriman.

'There are no auspicious numbers here,' replied the Master of Ruin, without looking up from his post, his brow vexed. 'I can find no Euclidean angles and no vectors cohering. The order of this place will not hold.'

'So what you are saying,' offered Sanakht, polishing his jackal-bladed sword with grim intensity, 'is that you have no idea what these are.'

'Are they safe?' said Ahriman. 'We can venture down there?'

'Go down there?' said Tolbek, gauntlets bunched into fists that sparked at his fingertips. 'We will not find our father here, only madness and death.'

The Pyrae adept paced the bridge like an animal in heat, an alpha warrior once in ascendance, but now emasculated.

'For once I find myself in agreement with you, Tolbek,' said Ignis, fingers drifting over the starboard surveyor array as if seeking to impose order where none could ever exist. 'We will be walking blind into whatever snare this creature may have fashioned for us.'

'You mortals,' said Aforgomon***. 'Your lack of trust puts my kind to shame. I told you what they are – gateways to where you need to go.'***

'That is what you *say* they are, but whether to believe that is another matter entirely,' said Ahriman. 'You are neverborn, so I am inclined to doubt every word you say.'

'What reason have I to lie, Ahzek?' said Aforgomon.

'You need no reason, daemon – it is your nature to deceive. I would be a fool to blindly follow you. If we are to set foot on these warp archipelagos, then I need to know what they are.'

'All you need to know is that here is where you have to be, Ahriman,' said Aforgomon. ***'If you wish to save your father, this is the only way onwards.'***

'A route you happen to know about just as we seek it.'

'Your own father bound me to this form and sent me to you, Ahzek,' said Aforgomon, drawing its black, metalled fingers across the invocatus symbols graven on its torso. The squealing of metal on metal set Ahriman's teeth on edge. ***'And didn't I tell you that you would fail without my help?'***

'You also told me you were a scorpion upon my back.'

The daemon laughed. ***'Theatrics, Ahzek, nothing more. My kind cannot help but indulge in them when dealing with mortals.'***

'Why are we even listening to this thing?' snapped Hathor Maat, standing at the back of the bridge, looking like he wanted to be absolutely anywhere but there. His arms were folded and his fingers tapped a restless tattoo against his forearms as though he were communicating in code.

'Perhaps your sire saw further than you,' said Aforgomon. ***'Perhaps he saw the means by which I would help save him. And maybe he saw that I knew this is where you need to be.'***

Tolbek shook his head. 'Led here by a daemon on the back of an impossible vision had by a mortal psychometric in the hopes that our father knew of it. A black day for the Thousand Sons.'

'Would that Menkaura was here,' said Hathor Maat. 'He would know the truth of it.'

Ahriman turned on Hathor Maat. 'Hold your tongue,' he snapped as the guilt of his old comrade's abandonment seared through him once more. 'Menkaura did not command this expedition. That burden fell to me.'

'And what a grand job you are doing,' sneered Hathor Maat. 'Half our force dead and our greatest seer lost to the enemy, suffering who knows what monstrous tortures. That is, if the Wolves haven't already killed him.'

Hathor Maat stepped from the edge of the bridge, warming to his theme. 'And what did we take from that orbiting asylum? What great prize did the mighty Ahriman deem worthy of such loss? A mortal seer whose vision makes no logical sense. No, Ahzek, I'll not hold my tongue when you allow this *monster* to bring us here, a place of lunacy that will see us all dead.'

Ahriman reached inside for power, for the means to rip Hathor Maat apart from the inside, but all he felt were stirrings of minor cantrips. The glyph-scribed walls pulsed with powerful null-geometries and even those petty magicks sank deep inside him once more.

Perhaps the oppressive environment of the *Osiris Panthea* grated on Pavoni sensibilities more than most, but Ahriman sensed more to Hathor Maat's tirade than simple frustration.

Ahriman took a moment to compose himself in the face of the Black Ship's many provocations – the painful beehive static in his skull, the bitter taste of iron in his mouth and the repercussive pain burning in his spine and joints.

'You all saw what Mistress Shivani saw,' he said. 'The burning of the Yeselti refinery fields, the Library of Kadmus. There can be no other interpretation. Sanakht, you were inside her mind. You saw the truth of what she experienced when she held the chain attached to the primarch's grimoire.'

Sanakht shrugged. ‘I saw what the *Book of Magnus wanted* her to see, Ahzek. That is all I can say with certainty.’

‘In any case,’ said Tolbek, ‘that library was destroyed before anyone could properly open it, you remember? The primarch’s fury when he learned of its destruction was a terrible thing.’

‘I remember it well,’ said Ahriman, stepping down to the open space before the shipmaster’s throne. He walked in a slow circle, punctuating his words with a clenched fist to the palm. ‘But I also remember what I saw in the Pyramid of Photep. Library shelves heavy with books of Phoinikōn grammata, the alphabet brought to Boeotia by King Kadmus the Wanderer.’

‘You forget two things,’ said Hathor Maat, with the sneering tone of one who knows what he says will end a discussion. ‘First of all, what you believe she saw has already happened. And, secondly, it happened on Terra. You would fly us right to the heart of the Emperor’s realm on so flimsy a hope? Dorn’s picket fleets would destroy us before we pass Neptune’s moons.’

‘Which is why I brought you here,’ said Aforgomon, turning to face the shimmering, impossible islands of madness. ***‘You still don’t understand. You mortals and your oh-so-linear grasp of time. Surely the Fifteenth, who once read the paths of the future, must know that space and time are one, that there is no such thing as past, present or future. It is all the same dreaming moment, only viewed from differing aspects.’***

‘And these Seven Sleepers offer us a way back to where the *Book of Magnus* wants us to go?’ said Ahriman.

‘If you have sorrows enough to pay the price,’ said Aforgomon.

‘Trust me,’ said Ahriman. ‘We have sorrows to spare.’

The heat. Lemuel had forgotten the ferocious heat.

A swollen sun beat down on the anvil of the desert sands like a molten hammer. It shimmered from the ground in strength-sapping waves and bleached everything a hard shade of white. He’d expected the Wolves to suffer, born as they were on a world of ice, but they endured the searing heat as though born to it like the rad-cloaked *bedouyn* scav-tribes who plundered the toxic sands of the Nordafrikan *Great Thirst.* Surrounded by a hostile-looking cybernetic retinue, Promus stood with Nagasena, their heads craned upwards in disbelief.

Behind them, a Stormbird sat at the edge of this rocky ledge, its engines throbbing in a swirling cloud of salt dust. Their destination had been clearly visible from orbit and Gierlothnir Helblind had needed no avionics, no maps and no guidance from Lemuel to find it.

‘What was this? Do you know?’ asked Bjarki, standing beside a pair of fallen megaliths at the entrance of a shadowed, uninviting valley. His fingertips

followed the spiralling carvings cut into the base of one, but the Rune Priest knew better than to touch the wind-eroded stone.

‘We called them deadstones,’ said Lemuel.

‘Good name,’ said Bjarki.

‘The natives believed them to be a barrier against an army of evil spirits entombed in the mountain,’ said Lemuel. ‘They said this land had once been at the bottom of an ocean, and that this peak was only revealed when the immortal god slumbering beneath the sea shrugged and toppled the world.’

Bjarki shook his head in wonder. ‘Maybe they were right,’ he said, wiping his hands on the plates of his armour. ‘It’s as good an explanation as any. So Magnus and his sons went ahead and tore them down to see what would happen.’

Promus turned and said, ‘This is the place?’

‘Are you serious?’ asked Lemuel.

‘Answer the question.’

Lemuel laughed and looked up at the mountain.

Too vast and too monumental to have been raised by any natural means, ‘mountain’ was too small a word for this soaring wonder.

‘Yes, this is Aghoru,’ said Lemuel, looking up at the titan of mountains. ‘This is where everything began falling apart.’

FIFTEEN

The Reckoner
As big as Asaheim
You are my price

The Osiris Panthea was a slice of darkness above the descending Stormbird, visible only by its outline against a pulsing, kaleidoscopic borealis of immaterial hues. Its edges flickered with warp ghosts and warp static blistering against its impervious layers of protective energies.

Due to the nature of its cargo, the Black Ship had some of the most powerful veiling energies Ahriman had ever encountered. It was a vessel to which the entities of the Great Ocean were all but blind.

And now they were leaving its protective envelope.

'Venturing beyond an active Geller field is just about as close to a textbook definition of madness as I've heard,' said Sanakht, his fingers tense on the grips of his twin swords.

'This entire venture is rooted in madness,' replied Hathor Maat, both hands tightly clasped before him, as if in prayer. 'What does it matter if our sanity frays a little more?'

Ahriman wanted to chastise Hathor Maat for his lack of vision, but for once, he and the arrogant Pavoni adept were in perfect agreement.

'Lunacy awaits us,' said Tolbek, rippling his fingers and rolling a ball of blue flame between them like a sideshow hawker. 'The kind of lunacy that can only be found in a place as chaotic as the Great Ocean.'

'Are you afraid, Tolbek?' asked Hathor Maat.

'Aren't you?' countered the Pyrae adept. 'You're a fool if you're not.'

'We should all be afraid,' said Ahriman, moving forwards along the crew compartment to the pilot's bay, where Aforgomon was at the Stormbird's controls. The yokai was drawing them ever closer to the largest of the seven archipelagos, a rugged wedge of iron-black rock that resembled debris from a collapsed moon.

Lunatic energies surrounded it, and Ahriman felt a surge of vertigo as he saw shapes coalesce in the swirling vortices. His seersight pulsed behind his eyes as it sought to sift meaning from meaninglessness. His eyes narrowed as a singular image resolved for the briefest instant before fracturing into a swell of light.

'What did you see?' asked Aforgomon.

‘I am not sure,’ said Ahriman, trying to fix the brief image in his mind. ‘A lost eagle set against a leafless tree.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I imagine it refers to a name of a place or a person,’ said Ahriman. ‘The eagle tree… *Arvida?*’

‘Does that name hold meaning for you?’

‘No, but its root is Scandian.’

‘Maybe he is one of the Wolves.’

‘Perhaps,’ sighed Ahriman. ‘The Ruinstorm raging in the east makes any interpretation problematic. When the future remains so unclear, why does the past so often intrude?’

‘Because it is all that is definite,’ said Aforgomon.

Ahriman nodded, but thought back to Temelucha’s words as he climbed towards the Iron Oculus, and was no longer certain of the truth of that. He put aside thoughts of the unknown name and looked out through the canopy once more.

His eyes widened as he saw the soaring outline of a colossal megastructure, massive even from thousands of kilometres away. The last remnant of a failed civilisation or some purposeless edifice raised by the capricious whim of the warp?

‘What is that?’ he asked, nodding to the vast structure.

‘Our destination,’ said Aforgomon with glee. ***‘The Hall of Extinction.’***

Aforgomon set them down at the edge of a wide plain littered with rusted, age-ravaged engines. Perhaps the wreckage of a long ago war? The Thousand Sons debarked from the Stormbird before a tower so enormous in height and breadth that Ahriman’s mind entirely failed to grasp its inhuman scale.

Aforgomon, Hathor Maat, Tolbek and Sanakht lined up at his side, heads craned back in wonder.

The tower rose to such monumental height that even their Legion senses balked at its reality. Whoever or whatever had built this tower, this was clearly their masterwork. From its colossal footings to its highest spires, this was work only possible in a realm unconfined by physical laws.

Given its title, the sight touched Ahriman with equal parts awe and dread as they marched towards a soaring, brutalist archway, beneath which the mightiest Titans could pass through and look small.

He had studied the great works of architecture and saw how the immaterium’s mindless labours had influenced entire ages of form in the material world. He even saw from whence had flowed the inspiration behind Imperial design, everything from the gothic hives of Europa to the grandeur of the Magna *Macragge Civitas*.

Not even the Emperor's Palace, vast and ambitious and elaborate though it was, could compare to this planetary structure. Buttress upon buttress, spire upon spire, the Hall of Extinction rose with an arrogance that not even the Master of Mankind had dared dream, much less render in stone and steel.

Ahriman looked back the way they had come, now understanding that what he had taken to be wrecks of an ancient war fought in the tower's shadow, were in fact the discarded remnants of construction engines employed to build this titanic structure.

And now the collapsed nature of the planetoid made sense.

'They quarried their own world to extinction to build this,' he said.

Aforgomon nodded. ***'Entire servitor races, brought into being just for this monumental task, quarried the roots of the world and bore its bedrock to the surface.'***

'Why?' asked Hathor Maat. 'What purpose does this structure now serve? It looks abandoned.'

'It is,' agreed Aforgomon. ***'Once the daemonic masons had wrought the planet's bones into this paean to failed life they abandoned it.'***

'What a colossal waste of time,' snapped Tolbek.

'This is the warp,' said Aforgomon. ***'Time is meaningless.'***

Yet for all its towering magnificence and the unimaginable labour of its creation, Ahriman felt something skewed about the structure's reality, as if its entire immensity was an ingenious backdrop upon a theatrica stage.

The feeling diminished as the shadow of its great arch swallowed them and they entered the building. They marched for what seemed like an eternity until a vast circular chamber opened up before them, its stone floor adrift in dust and echoes.

Undulating shadows draped the walls and charnel winds sighed from a multitude of arches leading deeper into the structure. The lintel of each onward path was carved with strange runic symbols, the likes of which Ahriman did not know. For once he was glad of his ignorance, fearing what tragedies might lurk in their meanings.

Every square centimetre of the walls was engraved with carefully indented scriptwork, and Ahriman needed no special insight to know what these were.

'A tally of all the broken branches on the tree of life.'

'Indeed so,' said Aforgomon, nodding to where a hooded figure stood revealed in the centre of the chamber.

'Who is that?' asked Ahriman.

The black light of the symbols on Aforgomon's artificial body pulsed in wariness as it answered.

'That is the Reckoner.'

It took another two hours of walking before the Thousand Sons finally approached the Reckoner. In that time, he had not moved so much as a muscle, and Ahriman took the opportunity to study him and the inconstant streamers of aether-light that clung to him like corposant.

He had great power, that much was clear, but he was of mortal scale, hunched over in pale blue robes threaded with gold symbols of mystic significance. No face was visible beneath his hood, only the vague suggestion of depthless blackness and a pair of hollow eyes.

In one hand, he held a long staff, topped with a beaked skull wound with boiled leather and packed with sickly fragrances, like the plague-doctors of Old Earth. His other arm was hidden within many folds of fabric, suggestive of proportions that were insidiously *wrong,* as if unnatural anatomy lurked just beneath.

The Reckoner rapped his staff against the stone floor.

Dust bloomed and the echoes carried to each of the yawning archways, lingering for longer than they ought to. Sighs of regret blew from them in answer, and dust devils drew inwards on the backs of curious zephyrs.

The Thousand Sons halted, and the Reckoner's hooded gaze appraised each of them in turn. He nodded slowly, satisfied by whatever he had seen.

Aforgomon stepped forwards and bowed, a gesture of deference Ahriman had never expected to see the yokai make.

'I bring travellers who bear* such *sweet sorrows. Abyssal depths of grief and loss to fill entire wings of your halls.'

'Whose extinction do they seek?' said the Reckoner, his voice a hideous mingling of a corpse's death rattle and a drowning man's gurgling. Aforgomon turned and gestured for Ahriman to speak.

Ahriman hesitated. The creature before him was likely one of the neverborn, a being whose very existence was freighted with lies and deception.

'Extinction?'

The Reckoner sighed. 'For every species, idea, dream or belief that takes root, a million others wither on the vine. If they are remembered at all, it is only by the imprints of their dust and bones in rock.'

'But everything is remembered here?' asked Ahriman, craning his neck to look at the chamber's soaring scriptwork. 'Upon these walls, yes?'

'All dead things are known here and every stunted root may be followed back to the moment its thread was cut,' said the Reckoner.

'Why are so many of the halls empty?' asked Tolbek, pointing towards a vast archway, through which were visible smooth walls of raw stone.

'They will not be empty for long,' promised the Reckoner, turning and limping towards the untouched hall. 'Extinction is not a process with an end, it is an eternal, unending river.'

Ahriman and his companions followed the Reckoner, and gusting dust devils circled them like watchful hounds protecting a herd of livestock. The winds billowed around the Reckoner, and his robes shifted, as if his body were reshaping itself beneath the fabric.

'We seek a pathway into the past, to a moment of time on Old Earth,' said Ahriman, struggling to hide his revulsion. 'We were told that could be found here.'

'All facets of time and space are one,' said the Reckoner with a slow nod. 'All are bound by grief, for what is life but one endless and eternal parade of loss? Such are the threads that bind all existence together.'

In an earlier age, Ahriman might have sought to debate the point with the Reckoner, but his sorrow was too raw and too close to the surface for him to muster any counter.

They traversed the great hall until they reached the archway, its quoins crafted from blocks the size of Land Raiders. Passing beneath the arch, the passage sloped downwards towards the sound of rushing water in the distance.

The Reckoner fixed his gaze upon him and the furnaces of his eyes swelled until it seemed they surrounded Ahriman in fire.

'Show me your sorrows,' he commanded.

Two titanic guardians had once stood sentinel over this mountain, left by an ancient race that once held the galaxy in the palm of its hand then let it slip away. Portions of wreckage belonging to those towering machines were everywhere in evidence on the ascent into the sun-baked upland valley.

Lemuel saw gracefully curved shards of what looked like gleaming porcelain glittering like terrazzo scattered over the mountain's rugged haunches. As they crossed a soaring rock bridge over a deep canyon, he saw the vast, elongated head-section of one of the mountain's guardians.

'You were a thing of beauty,' he said, the fallen engine's proportions and graceful curves speaking to him, even in pieces. 'And the Thousand Sons destroyed you.'

The lens of its tapered cockpit section glittered a gorgeous azure that put Lemuel in mind of the watercolour of Terra's oceans that had hung in his villa in Mobayi.

'One thing they did right, then,' said Olgyr Widdowsyn, spitting a wad of reeking sputum. It dropped over two hundred metres to land, with pinpoint accuracy, in the centre of the downed machine's eye.

'Really? Even your Legion isn't without *some* aesthetic sensibilities,' said Lemuel, gesturing to the ornate leather knotwork on Widdowsyn's helm, and on his belt, and the wolf-carved bronze of his sword belt. 'Surely you can appreciate this?'

‘It was xenos,’ grunted Olgyr Widdowsyn. ‘It pleases me that it’s dead.’

‘Just because it was made by alien hands means it can’t be beautiful?’

Widdowsyn nodded and gave Lemuel a shove between his shoulder blades that felt like a punch. Jolts of searing pain lanced down Lemuel’s arm to his elbow.

‘Ja, you do understand,’ said Widdowsyn. ‘Now keep climbing.’

Lemuel rubbed his shoulder, already imagining bruising swelling from the impact of Widdowsyn’s fist. One more pain to add to the laundry list of hurts. The nerves in the stump of his severed arm had healed poorly, leaving a phantom pain that woke him in the night, reaching for a hand that wasn’t there. At least the splints on his legs were gone, but Widdowsyn had set them just crooked enough to make even walking on level surfaces painful.

Climbing this mountain was a special kind of agony. Every step sent spikes of pain shooting up his spine and into regions he couldn’t imagine were connected.

The sun beat down remorselessly, just as he remembered from the last time he had visited this dungheap of a planet. The air was dry and every step kicked up salt dust that parched his throat and set his breath to a rasping wheeze.

Back when they were still brothers and the world had made sense, the Thousand Sons had marched into the mountain with the Space Wolves at their side. Lemuel could barely believe that was only a few short years ago. So much had happened. The galaxy was no longer the same place.

What changes might the next few years bring?

Far ahead, Bödvar Bjarki led the way, alongside the giant warrior in burnished plate of unmarked silver. Lemuel had never seen his like before, but sensed great power emanating from him. Behind them came a chained Legion warrior clad in a simple bodyglove, escorted by Sister Caesaria and surrounded by a cohort of Thallaxi.

Lemuel could not remember if he knew this warrior, but the cursive form of his tattoos spoke of Prospero’s sensibilities.

Had the Wolves captured him on Kamiti Sona as well?

Most likely, but why bring him to Aghoru?

More painted cybernetics marched on the flanks – hunchbacked things with spindle-limbs and smooth skull-plates that glitched with low-level static and the threat of imminent violence.

Red-robed Mechanicum handlers bent over the floating devices that controlled them, and Lemuel heard them communicate via clicking, binaric cant. He couldn’t understand what they said, but it was clear they were arguing.

A hundred metres ahead, walking alongside Yasu Nagasena was Chaiya. Lemuel had tried to climb higher and faster to speak to her, but Olgyr Widdowsyn had clamped a hand on his shoulder and simply said, ‘No.’

She'd looked back at him once with a look of such withering contempt that, for once, he was glad of the Wolf's refusal to allow him more than a metre from his side.

'That one does not like you, I think,' observed Widdowsyn.

'No,' agreed Lemuel. 'Not any more.'

'Once she did? Was she your woman?'

'No, Chaiya was Camille's wom– Camille's lover.'

Widdowsyn nodded. 'The witch taken by the red sorcerers.'

'She wasn't a witch,' snapped Lemuel.

'But she had powers, ja? Like you?'

'Powers, yes, but not like mine.'

'Then she was a witch,' said Widdowsyn, reaching up to touch a furred talisman hanging at his gorget. 'What could she do?'

Lemuel remembered spending hours listening to Camille as she gingerly touched unearthed finds from archaeological digs. Household objects mostly – items of everyday use without the risk of carrying dangerous or painful memories.

'She was a psychometric,' said Lemuel. 'She could touch an object and tell you where it came from, who had used it and when. She could tell the story of all the lives it had touched and what it meant to them.'

Widdowsyn paused and shielded his eyes from the sun.

'So why does her woman now hate you?'

'I did something very bad,' answered Lemuel, but said no more, unwilling to relive the moment when he made a mother kill her own son. 'Something for which I will have to answer one day.'

They marched for another five hours into the burning cauldron of the mountain, stopping only to allow the non-legionaries to drink and briefly rest in the shadow of the cybernetics. Lemuel's coal-dark skin shimmered in the heat, soaked in sweat and badly burned. The sun was three hours past its zenith by the time they reached their destination.

By now, Lemuel had all but tuned out anything but his own misery. Both his legs were stumps of fiery pain, his spine a white-hot column of agony that near blinded him. His head pounded with heatstroke.

He lurched forwards into Olgyr Widdowsyn's back and looked up in confusion, the brightness of the sun dazzling on the legionary's frost-grey plate. Lemuel worked up just enough moisture in his mouth to speak.

'Why have we stopped?'

'We're here,' said Widdowsyn.

Lemuel's mouth fell open at the sight before him: a wide crater of vitrified rock that lay like a shallow basin before an immense gouge in the cliffs that almost

split the mountain in two. The flank of the mountain had been bisected as cleanly as if an orbital laser had sliced through its exact centre line and carved a precise V-shaped cleft.

But no weapon devised by the Martian priesthood had ever been so accurate or so thorough. The heart of the mountain was laid bare, the mountain's geological history exposed for all to see. Veined strata of rock that had never before seen the sun glittered, and the savants of the Mechanicum geologicus might have learned Aghoru's deepest secrets had they been given the time to study the mountain's heart.

At the centre of the crater stood an incongruous pillar of black rock, like a volcanic plug left isolated after the softer rock encasing it had been worn away by aeons of erosion.

It seemed for an instant that Lemuel saw two figures atop the rock spire, one a giant of copper skin, the other a fallen son lying supine in his arms. Lemuel blinked away the sweat gumming his eyes, and the two figures vanished.

Bödvar Bjarki and the warrior in the burnished plate led them through the crater, with Sister Caesaria and her captured son of Magnus. They passed the spire of black rock towards the gouge cut into the mountain, and all thoughts of fatigue fled Lemuel as he lifted his eyes to their eventual destination.

Carved into the cleft of the mountain was a magnificent set of stairs wrought from palest marble veined with gold and blue. Statues of armoured warriors, robed scholars, crowned kings and learned thinkers lined the ascent.

'Was it like this before?' asked Widdowsyn.

Lemuel had not climbed this high when he last came to Aghoru, but Ahriman had described the encounter with the mountain's guardians in exhaustive detail. In none of those accounts had the Chief Librarian described anything remotely like this.

He shook his head, his eyes following the stairs as they pierced the heart of the mountain.

'What do you think is at the end of the stairs?' he asked.

'The Crimson King,' answered Widdowsyn. 'Who else would carve a mountain as big as Asaheim for his throne?'

The inferno fell away from Ahriman, and he found himself alone in absolute darkness. An emptiness so profound he could not even begin to grasp its enormity. He searched for some visual anchor, some means of orienting himself in this endless expanse of black emptiness.

Where was he?

Given his starting place, a neverborn hall in the depths of the Great Ocean, that was next to impossible to answer.

A hot breath of wind touched him, redolent with the twin tastes of war – smoke and burned metal. It blew again, drawing him onwards.

Was this the beginning of the journey into Terra's past, to the ruins of Old Earth? Star-faring legends told of crews swept into past and future by the raging tides of the Great Ocean, but even in the most reliable accounts of such things, those voyages were calamitous affairs, full of madness and tempests.

This was a voyage that would not begin without payment.

Aforgomon had warned him the price would be sorrow, but what did that mean? As if by asking the question, an answer of sorts presented itself.

In the blink of an eye the darkness was gone, and Ahriman found himself standing beneath a brazen sun that beat down like a fiery hammer upon the anvil of the earth. A great throng of people surrounded him: thousands of men, women and children. They milled aimlessly through a makeshift encampment that sprawled over the hills surrounding a marble-walled city of golden spires and clay-tiled domes.

A pall of smoke hung low over the eastern and southern horizons. Lightning flickered in petrochemical clouds to the north, and striated clouds of atomic fallout shed their toxic ash over the ruins of a defeated enemy in the west.

Surrounded by war, yet somehow this city had escaped its ruinous effects, the gates intact and its walls neither pockmarked by shell impacts nor vitrified by high-energy lasers. A memory tugged at Ahriman, one he could barely believe was his own – one that time and his transformation into a legionary had rendered as insubstantial as mist.

'I know this place,' said Ahriman.

'Of course you do, dung-brain. It's Susa,' said a voice beside him.

Ahriman turned to see a young boy of around ten summers standing beside him, his features as familiar to him as his own. He held Ahriman's hand, his face a mixture of innocence and hope that twisted a knife of guilt and loss in his belly.

Ahriman drew in a shocked breath.

'Ohrmuzd…' he said.

And with his brother's name spoken, the scene twisted and changed once more, the ancient city of the Achaemenid empire vanishing like a desert mirage. In its place, a ridge of snow-capped peaks running across the roof of the world. Ahriman and a pack of young boys in training *chitons* ran the slender ridge, sprinting from ice-slick boulders to leap clefts in the rock.

Ahriman ran with the pack, feeling a lightness and youthful strength to his body he had all but forgotten. He laughed as he ran, his lungs burning as they fought to draw breath from the thin, high air.

'Hurry up, Ahzek!' shouted Ohrmuzd, apparently untroubled by the altitude. His brother was ahead of the frontrunners by ten lengths or more, his mahogany

skin and jet-black hair contrasting starkly with the whiteness of the snow.

A dozen other boys ran the mountains, but only two others were between Ahriman and Ohrmuzd. He drew deep on his reserves of strength and pulled level with the first runner.

Ahriman jinked to the side, easily avoiding a clumsy attempt to barge him from the path, remembering now how, at the time, he had just *known* which way the other boys would move. The other runner was just as predictable, and Ahriman ducked his outstretched leg to draw level with Ohrmuzd. The joy in his brother's face was infectious. They laughed together, legs pumping as the end of the race came in sight. They were twins, best friends and recruits to the XV Legion, but still there was brotherly competition to win.

A waterfall dropped to an icy lake with only a few areas where a boy might break through, many more that were thick and hard as plascrete. This was their destination, a last threshold to cross before they passed from childhood to manhood.

They ran to the edge of the waterfall and, hand in hand, leapt from the edge of the cliff. They fell together, laughing hysterically as the ice rose up to meet them, with no way to tell if it were thin or hard as steel.

But Ahriman knew the answer this time. He had already lived this moment.

Ahriman and Ohrmuzd landed together, smashing through thin sheets of ice into glacial ice-melt.

But instead of plunging deep into the blackness of the water as Ahriman remembered, he found himself in the heart of a battle. Mass-reactives screamed past him. Blitzing hails of las-fire blistered the paintwork of the following tanks, and the sky was criss-crossed with missile contrails, flak explosions and spinning wrecks.

Fire rose ahead of him in a burning escarpment as the ruler of this world sought to deny the XV Legion entry to his last fortress.

Ahriman halted, unwilling to take even a single step onwards, as he recognised this moment and the horror that followed.

A gauntleted hand slammed him on the shoulder.

'Get a move on, brother,' said Ohrmuzd, his rich, cultured tones unmistakable, even through the vox of a battle helm. Ahriman's brother exemplified everything a Space Marine legionary ought to be: tall and broad shouldered, monstrously imposing, yet also regal and filled with authority. Lightning crackled at his right fist, bathing the red of his war-plate in flickering traceries of aether-light.

'No,' whispered Ahriman, as Ohrmuzd turned away without waiting for an answer. 'Ohrmuzd, please. Your powers. No…'

Ohrmuzd did not answer, and plunged into the fires.

Ahriman shook his head, paralysed with grief.

He didn't want to go on, didn't want to take another step.

But his body betrayed him, following Ohrmuzd through the bright fires as he had on that fateful day. He lost vision as the auto-senses of his armour flared in response. For a fraction of a second only, but it was enough for the world to change forever.

Ahriman's visor cleared and the breath caught in his throat.

Ohrmuzd stood with his arms upraised, body spasming in pain and terror.

Arcing traceries of lightning enveloped him. Aether power out of control, the Great Ocean pouring into him. Plate splitting as the flesh beneath underwent sudden, rampant and irreversible growth.

'Help… me…'

The same plea for aid he had only recently heard from Sobek.

Ahriman reached for his brother, knowing he could not save him, and his heart broke anew. Ohrmuzd's helm cracked down its centre, pushed apart from within. The right eye-lens shattered, revealing a wide, terrified blue eye rapidly filling with blood.

'*Help me,*' repeated Ohrmuzd, his body contorting as bones fused, split and expanded. His flesh was exploring every avenue of growth, no matter how deleterious. But the blue eye never wavered in its cry for help.

Ahriman could only watch as other Space Marines rushed to Ohrmuzd's side. Pavoni adepts doing their best to slow his explosive rate of hyper-evolution. Raptora warriors compressing the buckled plate of armour to his body.

None of it would work.

None of it would stop the flesh change.

Ahriman closed his eyes, but the image of Ohrmuzd's last moments were seared into his memory. Tears spilled down his cheeks and his chest heaved with the soul-deep loss of his twin brother. No wound had ever cut so keenly, not even the death of his parents in a nano-phage outbreak in the *Achaemenid Reconstruction Zone* – news that had come indirectly via an Imperial communique.

Eventually the curse of the Thousand Sons would manifest in Ahriman's flesh, churning within him even as he stood at the Emperor's side and first met his sire.

His recall of the time following that reunion was fractured and broken – memories of agonising pain and weeping, of grief and moments of strange lucidity where it seemed he was attended by four figures, each of whom offered a different boon to save him.

But they were boons offered at a price.

One that his gene-sire would be forced to pay.

By the time he emerged from stasis, renewed like a butterfly departing its chrysalis, Ohrmuzd was dead.

He had known, of course; the bond between twins knew the least of things. The other's death was a trauma that could not pass unfelt. Ahriman recalled Magnus' words to him when he had brought him the news of how the flesh change had killed Ohrmuzd.

'*That's the thing about betrayal. It always comes from within.*'

Ahriman sank to his knees, his head bowed in sorrow.

Darkness engulfed him, endless and absolute.

No, not absolute, for a gleam of silver shone before him, a light that shimmered like a star on a moonless night.

He focused all his attention upon it.

The light grew stronger, like a mercury-bright hole in the night. Ahriman reached for it and closed his fist around the light. He turned his hand, opening his fingers, already suspecting what he would see.

A shimmering silver coin nestled in his callused palm, uneven around its pressed edges and stamped with an oak-leaf cluster that was fractionally off-centre. He flipped the coin over with his thumb, revealing the profile of a noble king with aquiline cheekbones, hawk-like nose and piercing eyes.

'Dhul-Qarnayn,' said Ahriman, and with the great king named, his surroundings changed once again.

The rushing waters of a cold river flowed before him, its far distant shore obscured by infinite darkness. Ahriman could see no boundaries to the space, only the fast-flowing river, but from whence it flowed was a mystery. The Reckoner stood at the water's edge, an expectant look in the smouldering coals of his eyes.

The others who had come to the Seven Sleepers surrounded Ahriman in various states of disarray. Tolbek paced like a snarling attack dog, hurling bolts of phosphor-bright fire out over the ink-black waters of the river. Hathor Maat stared at his hands, weeping like an orphaned child, slamming his fists into the ground as though to purge his pain with further pain. Sanakht held a trembling blade to his own neck, as if contemplating slicing it deep into the meat of his throat.

Ahriman did not know what sorrows they had relived and offered, but knew they would at least be the equal of his.

Aforgomon alone stood unmoved, the daemon within the yokai's body unfazed by notions of regret, pain or sorrow. The neverborn could not know such things. Yet another reason to hate them.

Ahriman looked down at the silver coin, the mirror of the one he wore around his neck. His mother had given one to each of her twin boys on the eve of their journey to the Legion trials before the walls of Susa.

'Ohrmuzd,' he said. 'You are my price…'

Ahriman rose to his feet and strode towards the Reckoner. His eyes were wet with tears, his heart pierced by loss.

And this was but one of his sorrows.

Others vied for primacy in his mind: the faded memory of a doomed world named for the brightest star that heralds the dawn, the destruction of Prospero, the loss of so many brothers to the flesh change…

All painful, all part of the ever-growing tapestry of sorrows woven about him and which informed every facet of his personality. Each a grand tragedy to fill the world with tears, but none so personal as the loss represented by the coin nestled in his palm.

He held out his hand, offering it to the Reckoner.

'If I give you this, will I still remember him?' he asked.

'You will,' said the Reckoner, lifting the coin from Ahriman's hand with long, tapered fingers that ended in curling nails encrusted with grave-dirt. 'Why would I remove your pain? That would negate *you* suffering it.'

Ahriman nodded as the Reckoner slipped the coin within his robes. Pleasure rippled the creature's form and Ahriman would have given anything to unleash his powers against the vampiric neverborn.

'You have our sorrows,' he said. 'Now let us pass. Deliver what has been promised.'

'Very well,' said the Reckoner, moving between the Thousand Sons and taking some trinket or artefact from each of them, but ignoring Aforgomon. When he had taken his price from them all, he stood aside and gestured to the rushing waters of the icy river.

'The way is open to you,' said the Reckoner. 'The river awaits.'

'How do we cross it?' demanded Tolbek, his grief replaced by anger.

'You do not,' said the Reckoner, stirring the water's edge with the base of his staff. Ahriman had the gut-wrenching sensation of awful and terrible change being worked on the world by that seemingly mundane action.

'Stop that,' he said. 'Now.'

The Reckoner's eyes pulsed with dark amusement, but he did not stop his churning.

'When the waters rose in the darkness in the wake of the endless flood, they flowed into your memory. They flowed into your blood. You feel that, do you not?'

'We do,' agreed Ahriman. 'Now stop it or I will kill you.'

The Reckoner laughed. 'No, Ahzek Ahriman, you will not. For there is a space on the walls above for your name, and it is entirely in my hands whether to etch it now or at your appointed time.'

'I do not believe you,' said Ahriman.

The Reckoner lifted his staff from the water and said, ‘Then try to kill me and see what happens.’

‘Not today, but I *will* return here and kill you.’

‘Maybe so. But no man ever steps in the river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.’

‘You would quote the Weeping Philosopher?’ said Ahriman, moving his mind into the fifth enumeration. ‘If that is the limit of your wisdom, then you are not so clever as you believe.’

‘Then walk out into the water and let its current guide you, and we will see how clever you truly are.’

Hathor Maat pushed past Ahriman and said, ‘Come on. Why are we even bothering to talk to this thing? Let’s get this over and done with.’

Tolbek and Sanakht joined the Pavoni adept at the water’s edge. They looked back at Ahriman expectantly and waded into the river, pushing down thoughts of wreaking harm upon the Reckoner.

Its waters flowed around him, and he could feel its bone-deep chill even through his boots. The river looked like water, but that was a lie. This was the essence of the Great Ocean, rendered in a manner comprehensible to mortal minds.

He looked back over his shoulder to ask the Reckoner one last question: ‘How do we return to you?’

‘When you have what you seek, the past will spit you back out,’ said the Reckoner.

‘And if we fail?’

‘Then you will die, for the past is obdurate and finds ways to rid itself of things that do not belong.’

Ahriman nodded. What else had he expected save more cryptic answers and doom-laden pronouncements?

He turned and said, ‘Move out,’ before leading them into the blackness of the water. The currents buffeted him as the water came to his thighs, then his midriff. Rogue currents and unseen riptides snatched at him, seeking to pull him this way and that, but he kept true to his path.

His steps slowed as the water reached his chest, then lapped over his shoulder guards. The cold grew more intense with every step he took. He heard the sharp hikes of breath made by his companions.

Water broke against his helmet, and flickering lights spun and danced like reflected firelight in his eyes. He kept going, even as the water flowed around and over him.

Sounds became deadened, vision contracted. All he could hear was the roaring of the water. All he could see was a frothing silt enfolding him. He tasted ashes

and the reek of burning promethium. Scorched steel and molten flesh. His every breath was laced with fire, such that it felt as if his lungs were burning from the inside.

Ahriman felt the first stirring of fear in his breast, a feeling so alien, so unremembered, that for a moment he did not recognise it for what it was.

The power of the water was growing exponentially and every step became harder and harder to take. Though he had entered the river perpendicular to the water's flow, it felt as though he was walking directly against an angry tide.

He leaned in to the deep current, forcing a defiant path onwards. Spiteful undertow battered him and tried to spin him around. Surge tides snatched his limbs, pulling him off balance, but Ahriman kept going.

He heard distorted voices in his helm, panicked and questioning, but indistinct over the rushing of the water. He felt his armour protest at what was being asked of it, servos hissing and joints locking as he fought the inexorable strength of the river.

Eventually, he could go no farther.

A slamming body-blow of current knocked him from his feet, and without that anchor to hold him in place, Ahriman was swept up by the water and borne away at the mercy of the Reckoner's river of souls.

SIXTEEN

Out of the fire
A singular hatred
A fogged mirror

Amon broke the surface of an ocean and drew in a great breath of night air. His chest heaved as his lungs expanded and the swirling fireflies of light before his eyes began to recede. He took another breath as the greyness faded from his vision, the diminishing tunnel of light he had been drifting towards falling away from him.

His breathing coming at more regular intervals, Amon sought to find his bearings.

Where was he?

His last memory was of seeing his father's face through the water as he was drawn inexorably into the depths. Spectral hands dragging him deeper underwater, lungs crying for air and the cold of the grave spreading through him.

He'd fought the things seeking to drown him until eventually they released him.

Had he overcome them or had they simply tired of him?

Putting aside such thoughts as irrelevant, Amon turned around in the water in search of a shore or landmark.

He found neither.

He was adrift upon a dark ocean, its waters rising and falling with powerful swells.

The Great Ocean? Was this its true face?

No, this was something else, something imagined only in dreams and now made real – a place where the only limits were those souls placed upon themselves.

Overhead a star-filled vault of night stretched from horizon to horizon, but none of the celestial arrangements were familiar to him.

Treading water in his heavy armour and sweeping his arms around to keep afloat, Amon felt the first stirrings of unease. War-plate could survive the hard vacuum of space, so it could easily survive immersion in water, but not when it was cracked and split open.

He could feel his weight increasing by the second. The spaces within his greaves were already heavy with water, and he felt every void within his armour

gurgling as it filled.

Water spilled into his mouth and he spat it out.

It was fresh, without salt.

Not a conventional ocean, then.

Amon blinked away a sudden onslaught of imagery flashing through the forefront of his mind in quick succession. These were no Corvidae visions of potential futures, but living recollections of things he had already experienced.

He relived fighting the Wolves on Prospero, experienced the joy of seeing the Emperor at Nikaea, before that joy turned to dismay. His chest swelled as he remembered marching at the forefront of the Great Crusade, and exploring ever more intricate and beautiful expressions of knowledge. He laughed as he remembered volumes he had not read in a century, music he had listened to as a boy and art he had wept upon seeing in an alien gallery.

'The water is… *memory.*'

His efforts to stay afloat faltered and his head went under the surface. The ocean was not, as he had first supposed, water in the truest sense of the word. Liquid, yes, but so much more than water. Its substance was so fine it was silken and made up of so many infinitesimal particulates that every molecule within every droplet was a limitless repository of gathered wisdom. Lights swam in the depths, darting things that moved in pairs like mating birds rolling and diving in the air.

What were they?

He felt the essence of myriad lives and experiences unlived, the infinite complexity of the intersections between souls, and knew he swam in an ocean of ever-expanding knowledge.

I will swim this dream sea, he thought. *I will hear every secret it has to show me.*

Amon went under the water and, piece by piece, tore off his armour. Each plate sank into the darkness, and he sensed the ocean's hunger to learn from it. The darting lights were drawn to it, seeking to know what alien suns had warmed it, what impacts had blistered its paint and what tales it could tell of the being who once wore it.

Freed from his armour, Amon revelled in his new-found lightness of being. He picked a direction and set off, his body energised and no longer pained by the terrible hurts it had endured.

Amon had no notion of how long he swam, each stroke and spray of water imparting fresh understandings and differing perspectives. He rolled onto his back, staring up at the unmoving stars, and only the expanding horizons within his mind gave Amon any clue as to the passage of time.

He allowed himself to sink into the water, digesting the works of the great Jovian architects, the life of a worker in the labour camps surrounding the Emperor's great Himalazian works, and shared the thrill of excavating a long-lost city beneath the dust bowl south of Tali.

He swam back to the surface, giddy with the sheer joy of learning things thought beyond his understanding. But as he prepared to set off again, he saw something of the world around him had changed.

Ahead, the edge of the horizon was broken by the outline of something rising from the water.

An island?

Amon struck out towards it with powerful strokes.

As he drew nearer, a quiescent sense of dread crept up on him. Something of this island appeared somehow *fixed* where everything else around him was fluid and inconstant, filled with possibility and the potential for growth.

After so liberating a time in the ocean, he did not relish setting foot on land where change was anathema, but what other choice was there? The island swiftly grew in scale, its dimensions impossible to guess, but clearly enormous.

Amon saw the mass was not in fact one island, but many thousands, all linked by arched bridges like the steelwork frame beneath the Pyramid of Photep. He saw curious formations in the islands' mass, suggestive of forms he felt he ought to recognise. Each resemblance was more profound than the last, but he could not be sure any were intended, for they changed upon his next glance.

Perhaps this island was not so fixed after all.

Amon reached its sheer edge and climbed from the water. Its substance was porous and gnarled like an ancient coral reef heaved to the ocean's surface. Handholds were plentiful, and Amon easily climbed the ten metres or so to the top of the cliffs.

He hauled himself over the top and stood to survey his surroundings. The coral island resembled the dune sea of a black desert, the ground underfoot gritty like broken glass or granulated basalt.

He heard the soft whisper of the ocean's infinite spaces and limitless wonders. Amon half turned back towards the water, but his resolve held firm and he resisted the call to swim forever in its depths. Instead, he pushed on, climbing steep ridges and unnaturally shaped contours. The ground crunched underfoot as he climbed towards what he hoped was the centre of the island.

Without the ocean's buoyancy, his body felt inordinately heavy, far worse than when his subtle body returned to flesh. His bodyglove hung from a physique wasted by the many years he had spent following the secret footsteps of his lost father.

Never in his life had he felt so weak.

Amon stumbled and sank to his knees. The breath rattled in his chest as though filled with glassy fragments and his eyes stung with abrasive dust blown from the ground.

He heard the crunch of footsteps across the coral's surface and wearily lifted his head, squinting through eyes gummed with dust and stinging sweat.

A tall man swathed in a ragged cloak of dark feathers was coming towards him with faltering strides, using a heqa staff fashioned from driftwood for support. His hair was matted grey, pulled back over wrinkled skin to a long scalp-lock that reached to the ground behind him. Tied across the centre of his skull and obscuring his eyes was a filthy bandage, one side stained with ancient blood.

'Who approaches?' asked the blind man. 'Ahriman? Is that you?'

Amon shook his head, too horrified at what had become of the father he had so loved to form a coherent reply.

He licked his lips.

'No,' he replied at last. 'It is Amon.'

'Amon?' said the blind man. 'Oh, my son, of course… You came. You finally came…'

'I crossed the world to find you,' said Amon, his head sinking down over his chest and tears spilling down his cheeks as it dawned on him that his lonely quest was finally over.

The blind man's hand reached down to touch his shoulder.

'My son,' said Magnus the Red. 'Welcome to the Orrery.'

From darkness to light.

Ahriman had read the near-death accounts of drowning victims, and in many such cases, the survivors spoke of seeing a bright light in the instants before being hauled back to life. Some attributed these experiences to witnessing something divine, but Ahriman had long known that to be false. Such experiences were simply dissociative defence mechanisms that occurred in times of extreme danger, a means of distracting someone from the imminence of their own death.

Yet as the dark water bore him onwards, he saw the brightest light in the world rushing towards him as though down a narrow tunnel.

The feeling of weightlessness fell away in a heartbeat and the cold of the water was replaced with a searing heat. Ahriman's vision blurred, greying out as he passed from utter darkness to flickering orange brightness in a heartbeat. Brutal vertigo slammed into him and he fell to his knees, palms splayed before him.

Ahriman ripped off his helmet and cast it aside, retching what little remained in his stomach. His transhuman physiology made him all but immune to such weakness, but his limbs trembled, his vision spun and his gut clenched as though poisoned.

He moaned and made a fist with his hands, gathering up black and greasy clumps of oil-soaked sand. The source of the intolerable heat was behind him, and he looked over his shoulder to see a desert burning from horizon to horizon.

A great wall of orange flame licked the sky, and towering spires of carcinogenic smoke had turned day into the ancients' vision of a fiery underworld. Structures melted within the flames: silver-steel silos and vats. Kilometre-high drilling derricks drooped like waxen effigies, and container hangars collapsed inwards as their walls bent and split.

Blackened vehicles sat abandoned before the blazing refinery, thousands of wheeled trucks, armoured personnel carriers, main battle tanks and gutted tankers. The smell of burning metal and flesh was overpowering. Ahriman covered his mouth with a gritty palm, breathing mouthfuls of ash that tasted like it had spewed from a crematorium.

He staggered to his feet and grabbed his helmet before lurching away from the wreckage of the burning refinery. His eyes stung with acrid tears and his throat was scorched raw with heat and smoke inhalation. He walked until he could walk no more, finally crashing down behind a gutted Rhino lying in a blackened shell crater.

Ahriman coughed up great wads of frothed black matter and raised a hand to shield his eyes from the heat and brightness of the city-sized conflagration.

Other figures moved through the haze, but only when they lurched from the smoke could he tell they were fellow legionaries. Hathor Maat emerged first, looking drained by his experience. Sanakht came next, the swordsman for once looking less than perfectly balanced. Tolbek came last, and even the Pyrae adept was not untroubled by the flames.

One by one, they sank to their haunches in the lee of the wrecked vehicle.

'Where are we…?' managed Sanakht.

'I do not know,' replied Ahriman.

Tolbek reached up and wiped a gauntleted hand across the blackened hull of the Rhino. He smeared the soot, but enough cleared to reveal an icon painted onto its side, that of a great king casting what looked like serrated teeth from his outstretched hand.

'You recognise this?' he said.

Ahriman nodded. 'King Kadmus sowing the dragon's teeth.'

'The icon of the Yeselti,' said Hathor Maat. 'Throne, does that mean…'

Ahriman pushed himself to his feet and climbed to the lip of the crater. Beyond its blasted lip he saw an encamped army of global conquest, tens of thousands of armoured vehicles, millions of soldiers and an armada of hovering aircraft.

All under eagle-struck banners of crossed lightning bolts.

'We are on Terra,' he said.

Lemuel studied each of the statues as they climbed the processional stairs higher into the mountain. The faces were not unfamiliar to him; he had seen a great many of them upon marble plinths arranged around Occullum Square at the heart of Tizca.

'Do you know them?' asked Widdowsyn.

'Once I did,' said Lemuel, unable to mask the bitterness welling within him, 'but your interrogator's psychic trawling, and years of abuse in that orbital hellhole purged the memory of their names from my mind.'

Widdowsyn shrugged, as if the matter were of no import, and anger touched Lemuel.

'My life and my suffering means nothing to you, does it?'

Widdowsyn paused, hearing the anger in Lemuel's voice.

'You lay down with maleficarum,' said the warrior. 'You only remain alive because Yasu Nagasena thinks you will be of use in helping us destroy the remnants of the Red Cyclops. I thought you understood that?'

'I… I thought…'

'You thought what? That you were forgiven? There *is* no forgiveness for consorting with evil. There is only penance.'

'So this?' said Lemuel, holding up his arm and aiming the stump at Widdowsyn. '*This* is my penance?'

'Fenrys hjolda, no!' laughed Widdowsyn. 'From what Bjarki tells, this is just the beginning of your journey.'

As if this were the funniest thing he'd heard, Widdowsyn slapped a palm on his thigh and kept climbing, shaking his head with mirth.

'Come,' he shouted back. 'You walk in my shadow or you die.'

Lemuel trudged up the steps after him, letting the pain of his crooked legs fuel his anger towards his captors. He knew it was pointless. What good would anger do? But he sustained it nonetheless, imagining all manner of violence worked upon the Wolf's head.

He had reached one hundred and eight ways he would enjoy seeing Widdowsyn die before they reached the summit of the steps. Lemuel's leg moved automatically, seeking the next step and finding that there were no more.

It wasn't the top of the mountain, not by a long way, but the air felt thin and the sun was perfectly framed over spires of rock too angular and too evenly spaced to be the result of any natural processes.

The interior of the mountain's flank had been reshaped in the likeness of a grand arena, like the killing grounds built by ancient Romanii kings to stage bloody games for the entertainment of the masses. At least five hundred metres in diameter, tiered arrays of stone benches climbed from the sand to a dizzying height.

Enough to seat ten thousand souls.

But only one awaited them.

Lemuel's bowels turned to water and his bladder cramped with the almost uncontrollable urge to empty itself.

'No,' said Lemuel, as if denying it would somehow make it not so. 'No.'

Seated upon a great throne of gold opposite them within the Emperor's raised pavilion was the splintered soul-shard of Magnus the Red, clad in armour of bronze and with his glittering blade unsheathed across his thighs. Lemuel had never seen this aspect of the Crimson King, but it was clear this was the primarch arrayed for war.

Magnus' red hair was bound by a golden circlet with a red gem at its centre, and the hatred that flowed into Lemuel from the primarch's burning eye was so singular it drove him to his knees, weeping in terror.

His own human hate was a petty thing by comparison.

Lemuel hated the Wolves for breaking his legs and locking him away in purgatory for five years. He hated them for being part of the reason the galaxy was aflame.

But such grievances were insignificant when set against the razing of a world and the death of sons.

'Do you like your place of execution?' asked Magnus.

The four legionaries marched from the wrecked Rhino towards the Imperial lines, gazing about themselves in wonderment. None of them had set foot on Terra in decades, nor had any truly expected to see it again.

Even though the air was thick with petrochemicals and ash, every breath felt different.

'I can't believe it,' said Hathor Maat. 'I'd always assumed the stories of travellers cast through time by the Great Ocean were allegorical or metaphors for deeper truths. I never expected them to be real.'

'I don't think any of us did,' said Ahriman.

'Then why did we follow the word of a daemon?' demanded Tolbek, the vast inferno burning behind them inflaming his Pyrae passions. 'On a straw-thin hope?'

'It was the only hope we had,' pointed out Sanakht.

'You would agree with him, wouldn't you?'

'Enough!' snapped Ahriman as he saw Sanakht reach for his blades. 'Look, our arrival has not gone unnoticed.'

A demi-squadron of cavalrymen was riding towards them on gleaming steeds with flaming red pennons.

'Didn't our Legion take part in this fight?' said Hathor Maat.

‘I believe we did, but whatever records there are of it were lost on Prospero,’ said Ahriman, searching his memory for what little information had been recorded of the Boeotian campaigns.

‘Then might we expect these men to be surprised to see four legionaries walking from the ruins of an enemy refinery?’ pointed out Sanakht, as the five riders lowered gleaming, steel-tipped lances.

‘They will be,’ agreed Ahriman with a note of real regret in his voice. ‘But we are Space Marines, and in this time the Legiones Astartes are all loyal to the Emperor.’

The riders reined in their cybernetic steeds, and Ahriman saw they were green-jacketed hussars with plumed helms of an impractical-looking design that left their faces exposed.

Their lances were lowered, but when they saw the nature of the warriors before them, they were swiftly raised. The lead rider spurred his steel horse forwards and socketed his lance in a holster worked into the mount’s flank.

‘I am Captain Berardo BonGiovanni,’ he said in thickly accented Gothic with the slow cadence of the Terran-born. ‘We weren’t expecting to see anyone walk out of that blaze this morning, let alone warriors of the Legions.’

Ahriman nodded and said, ‘The fall of a Terran dynasty, even a rebel one, merits the attention of the Fifteenth.’

‘Indeed so, lord,’ replied BonGiovanni, ‘but some advance word would have been a courtesy.’

Ahriman was impressed. The arrival of the Emperor’s legionaries would intimidate most mortals, but BonGiovanni was maintaining his composure. His riders spread out in a line, lances raised and their crimson gonfalon snapping in the rogue thermals billowing from the refinery.

‘You are, of course, correct,’ replied Ahriman. ‘But matters are afoot that require immediate action, which does not always allow for professional courtesy between fellow warriors. My apologies to yourself and Commander Selud.’

‘You’re Legion, my lord,’ said BonGiovanni. ‘You don’t need to apologise, but Commander Selud’s not in charge any more.’

‘Of course not,’ agreed Ahriman as his recall of this moment in the Legion’s history caught up with the conversation. ‘He was removed at… oh six thirty-five, wasn’t he?’

‘He was,’ said BonGiovanni. ‘How did you know?’

‘You recognise to which Legion I belong?’

‘You are the Fifteenth, lord, by your millennial markings.’

‘Then that should answer your question.’

BonGiovanni nodded with a reckless grin and shifted in his saddle, as if debating whether to say anything in reply.

‘Captain?’ asked Ahriman.

‘Those matters you mentioned,’ asked BonGiovanni, obviously keen to earn glory at the side of the Emperor’s finest. ‘Can we help?’

‘As a matter of fact, you can,’ said Ahriman.

Promus walked carefully towards Magnus, feeling as though a host of unseen eyes were upon him. The rising bench seats were empty, but the sound of the wind blowing over them was like the soft murmur of myriad silent observers.

‘You know this place, don’t you?’ said Bjarki.

Promus nodded.

‘He mocks us with what he has wrought. He knows I will recognise its significance.’

‘Then we mock him back,’ grinned Bjarki, turning and spitting on the ground, shifting his frost-bladed sword from hand to hand. Promus hadn’t even noticed he’d drawn it.

‘Hjolda!’ cried the Wolf towards Magnus, swinging his sword in muscle-loosening practice swings. ‘This is a grand fighting pit you’ve made, but I’ve seen better. On Fenris, the Fathsrk cut into the ice for theirs, but the Balt were more direct, ja? Bone spikes around the edges, a few heads on spears, that sort of thing. Ah, but the Ostmaan… Oh, the Ostmaan. Even if their land-thirst was slaked and there was no need to go on the murder-make, they would reave and take many captives. They would pit tribe against tribe and make red snow underfoot even when there was no snow lying.’

Bjarki paused, grinning like a madman as he turned in a slow circle and nodded slowly. The Rune Priest planted his sword in the ground before him.

‘But it will do for us to slay you again.’

Promus stood with Bjarki on his left as Magnus rose from his throne. The primarch’s single eye blazed with anger.

‘Do you really think you can defeat me?’ he asked.

Bjarki shrugged. ‘Maybe, maybe not. Since when does that matter?’

‘It matters,’ said Nagasena, appearing at his other shoulder and drawing his borrowed blade. ‘If Menkaura is to be believed, it matters a great deal.’

Though no love had been lost between Promus and the swordsman, to see Nagasena without *Shoujiki* was somehow unnatural. No matter that this sword was perfectly balanced and crafted by a master, it was not *his*. It did not bear the promise Nagasena had made upon it.

‘The Blind Oracle,’ said Magnus. ‘Yes, let me see my son.’

‘You were warned,’ continued Promus, ignoring the primarch’s request and unsheathing his psy-sword of blue steel and crystal. ‘I was there. I stood with Targutai Yesugei and many of my brothers to speak for you. We did this unasked, because we believed it was the right thing to do.’

He stepped towards Magnus, and a surge of psychic energy along his blade set it aglow.

Promus fought to control his anger, an anger that had, until this moment, smouldered like a banked fire, but which now threatened to grow into an inferno.

He was dimly aware of the Ursarax spreading out to his left and the Vorax automata stalking to his right. He paid them no heed, all his fury, all his hurt and all the aching sense of a brotherhood betrayed on that day pouring out of him in a torrent of anguish.

'You broke faith with the Emperor and you broke faith with your brothers!' roared Promus. 'We defended you, but you lied to us. To all of us. You have no right to feel anger towards us. None. You were warned. And for what did you betray us? A chance to gaze into the abyss and see what might stare back?'

'You have no idea what I saw,' said Magnus.

Promus shook his head, taking another step towards Magnus. His allies followed suit, and he felt their unease. He shared it. Approaching a primarch with hostile intent, even a splintered shade of one, felt like suicide.

But Promus was past caring.

He aimed his sword at the Crimson King's heart.

'I remember the Emperor's command, word for word – "Woe betide he who ignores my warning or breaks faith with me. He shall be my enemy, and I will visit such destruction upon him and all his followers that, until the end of all things, he shall rue the day he turned from my light." Did you think that was an empty threat? Did you *really* think your lies would not be uncovered, that you could betray your father and He would not know of it?'

The fire on Promus' sword grew brighter with every word until it shone with the luminance of a sun.

'You broke faith with the Emperor,' repeated Promus, his heart breaking anew and his voice cracking as he spoke words that had been bottled inside him for years. 'So I ask you this. What else could you expect but Primarch Russ and his Wolves being set upon you?'

Magnus dropped lightly to the sands and marched towards them. Promus steeled himself for the fight to come, marshalling his psychic defences, and lifting his blazing sword to his shoulder.

Magnus walked calmly into the heart of the arena like a champion gladiator ready for the bout to secure his freedom. The Vorax and Ursarax extended their curving lines around Magnus to surround him. With the exception of Olgyr Widdowsyn, who remained by Lemuel Gaumon's side, the Space Wolves stood with their leader. Only Sister Caesaria did not draw closer, ensuring her null did not impede his and Bjarki's powers while keeping Menkaura's ability deadened.

Magnus surveyed the forces arrayed against him and grinned.

‘Tell me, Master Nagasena, how many men did you bring with you when you climbed the steps of the Preceptory to kill the Crusader Host?’

‘Around three hundred Black Sentinels,’ said Nagasena. ‘And I never went there to kill them.’

‘Don’t say another word,’ snapped Promus.

‘Three hundred?’ said Magnus. ‘That would seem a woefully inadequate number for such a potentially dangerous mission.’

‘Perhaps, but one of your own sons prevented it from becoming a massacre,’ said Nagasena. ‘A warrior named Atharva.’

Promus saw a change in the Crimson King’s aura, a pained regret that, on any other individual, he might have attributed to guilt. It vanished almost as soon as he noticed it.

Magnus looked left and right at the ring of steel and flesh encircling him. He lifted his golden khopesh and swung it in a dazzling figure of eight, his eye alight with anticipation.

‘Do you think you have brought enough to kill *me?*’ he asked.

‘We shall see,’ said Nagasena.

Magnus grinned and cracked his neck. ‘Indeed we shall.’

Promus lowered his blade and looked back over his shoulder to where Credence Araxe and Vindicatrix awaited his word.

He nodded and said, ‘Fire.’

A floating sphere of warp flame illuminated the lee of an overhanging spur of coral upon Magnus’ island. It required no fuel and cast a warming glow over Amon and his gene-sire. They sat in silence, watching the dance of stars from a cliff high above the dark ocean.

Within the water, it had seemed the stars were static, but from here Amon now saw they moved in an intricate pattern that appeared random but actually possessed an underlying motion as predictable as clockwork.

He studied Magnus’ face. He had not thought it possible, but his father had profoundly aged. The courage that had seen him do battle against Leman Russ was still there, as was the wisdom in his hidden gaze, but the lines on his face were deep canyons, and his skin had the texture of yellowed vellum.

Amon struggled to know what to say. He and his father had always enjoyed a close rapport, but the man before him felt like a stranger. Had so much time passed for Magnus that he had forgotten their friendship?

Yet simply being in the presence of Magnus was invigorating, and the weariness that had plagued Amon as he climbed from the water was diminishing with every passing moment. But such renewal came at a price, and with his returning strength came all his old hurts. The grinding agony pulsing from the

shattered ruin of his spine, spliced with innumerable grafts bonded by Pavoni artifice, would always be with him.

'I am sorry, my son,' said Magnus at last.

'For what?'

'For the pain you suffer because of me,' said Magnus, staring far out to sea. 'And for leaving you in the Great Ocean as I did. That was not my intention, but I lost myself. I was… distraught and I had to begin the building of the Orrery alone.'

Anger touched Amon, an emotion he had never thought to feel towards his primarch.

'Then why ask for my help?'

'I did?'

'Yes. Atop the Obsidian Tower. You promised we would build the greatest library the galaxy had ever seen. You told me we would build it together.'

Magnus shook his head with a rueful sigh.

'I was boastful back then,' he said.

'Back then?' asked Amon. 'How long have you been here?'

Magnus shrugged his raven-cloaked shoulders and sighed. 'Too long. How many years did you spend in search of me?'

'I do not know. A great many, I think,' said Amon, hearing evasion in Magnus' answer. 'Time is hard to gauge on the Planet of the Sorcerers.'

Magnus nodded, accepting that truth, and they lapsed into silence once more.

'So you found a place for the Orrery,' said Amon, looking out to sea.

'I did,' agreed Magnus, running a hand across his features, and Amon saw just how deep the weariness in his father's soul ran.

Seeing him so bowed made Amon want to weep.

'The moment I left you I was… not myself,' said Magnus, his blindfolded gaze never leaving the cold flames. 'Much of me had been broken beyond repair, Amon. Too much has already been lost. In truth, I am not sure I can ever be the soul I once was. If I go back with you, I fear I will diminish with every breath.'

Amon's anger fled in the face of Magnus' vulnerability.

How little he and his brothers understood of their father's burdens, and how much they had taken his immortal presence and unbending strength for granted.

Magnus reached a hand out to the fire, staring into its pellucid depths. 'When I… came back to myself, I was so very, very far from you in time and space. I *wanted* to bring you to me, but I could hear the song of the world ocean calling to me in my mind. And when I found this planet, the place where I would build the Orrery, and saw the scale of what lay before me, I knew I could only do it alone.'

'Why alone?' pressed Amon. 'I could have *helped.*'

'No, you would have been long dead by now.'

Amon kept silent. Magnus' words spoke of a time span where even a functionally immortal legionary would certainly perish.

'And you spent all the time since then building the Orrery?' asked Amon. 'Filling its world ocean with memory?'

'Among other things,' said Magnus with a grin. 'Sometimes I would fly the Great Ocean to gain a better understanding of how the galaxy had moved on without me. Once I even dared Lorgar's Ruinstorm and bore a creaking ship of Vulkan's lost sons through its tempests.'

'So what happens now?'

Magnus stood and his raven cloak parted to reveal his armour, burnished bronze and boiled red leather. 'We go back to what remains of our great Legion. We attempt to finish what I have started here with the time I have left.'

Amon stood and held out his hand. 'We will finish it together.'

'We shall,' said Magnus.

PART THREE
THE OPENING OF THE MOUTH

SEVENTEEN

Echoed souls
Blood and sand
A good man

It took Ahriman and his companions another six hours to reach their destination. They traversed rugged haunches of mountain landscapes, great swathes of forest and vast bodies of polluted sludge that had once been glitter-sheened lakes.

Acidic rain had poured down the mountains, poisoning the waters and laying waste to an ecosystem already reeling from centuries of global war. Flammable vapours leaked from the bedrock and the mountain rocks were hazed with imminent ignition.

The Tupelov Lancers matched the punishing battle pace of the legionaries, riding their iron steeds along hardpan military roads that criss-crossed a devastated landscape of blackened wrecks, fire-gutted settlements and smouldering pyres of corpses stacked like cordwood.

BonGiovanni led the way, threading a path through the thousands of Imperial camps spread around the burning Yeselti refinery fields as best he could, angling a course higher into the peaks surrounding Mount Cithaeron.

A vast city of rusted booster cradles glimpsed on the western horizon was identified as Meghara, the first oathing city for the regiments of the Old Hundred before they shipped off world to begin the conquest of the solar system. BonGiovanni explained the city had been quarantined after militant anti-Unity cells released a rapacious gene-plague that fused living tissue and inanimate matter in hideous ways.

The city was soon lost to sight as the mountains rose around them, and the higher they travelled, the more Terra opened up to them.

Far to the east and south were wide valleys that once ran with meandering rivers, but which were now arid dust canyons. The brooding twilight of smog boiling from the refineries behind them filtered the failing sunlight through a haze of toxic layers.

The war-ravaged majesty of humanity's birthrock was intoxicating: striated bands of petrocarbon storms raging in the ionosphere, the glittering spires of a distant missile launch facility, ice-filled shell craters in wastelands of petrified forests, clashing magnetic borealae to the east where fleets of transports plied the shipping lanes running between Terra and its orbital plates.

Ahriman still found it strange that such beauty could be found in wanton destruction. It was a contradiction that had seen brother set against brother since the first primate raised a bone club to dash out the brains of its fellow.

His eyes were drawn up towards the distant shadow of a matt-black leviathan hanging in the clouds and attended by a fleet of gravitic tenders. It seemed impossible that such a titanic craft could possibly remain airborne, and the sight of it triggered a flash of…

Corvidae foresight…?

A memory?

BonGiovanni's warriors lifted their lances and let out whooping yells in salute of the gargantuan ship. They called it the *Lux Ferem,* and chanted its name over and over again, wishing it good hunting and safe travels.

Eventually the convoy left the military roads and began climbing mountain paths that bore track marks of civilian transports. Their route followed a switchback higher and higher, eventually running through a jagged cleft between two peaks.

Ahriman had never been to this place before, but recognised it from the description given by Camille Shivani. A thrill of anticipation travelled the length of his spine as he understood they were close to one of the shards of Magnus.

The switchback pathway widened onto a plateau, shorn from the mountain by the detonation of a rogue shell. A trio of rugged Cargo-6 haulers were parked in a semicircle, their hulls dusty from the climb and with canvas awnings strung between them to form a sheltered camp.

Ahriman led them into the site, taking a moment to study the dozens of crates, hermetic specimen-capsules, excavation equipment, numerous canvas tents and hab-shelters arranged in an orderly, logical fashion. Four servitors looked up with vacant expressions as they approached, but quickly returned to their dormant state.

'This is it?' asked Tolbek, standing before a doorway worked into the cliff face, a massive trilithon formed of two vertical slabs and a lintel set atop them.

'How many other doorways going down the throat of the mountain do you think there are around here?' snapped Hathor Maat. 'Of course this is it.'

The lancers dismounted and tethered their steeds to the trucks, an unnecessary and curiously anachronistic gesture. BonGiovanni nodded to Ahriman as his men formed up with their rifles pulled in tight to their shoulders at the doorway.

'Go in and get them out,' said Ahriman. 'Ensure that nothing is damaged.'

'Yes, my lord,' said BonGiovanni, snapping down his visor. Lambent green photomech cursors slid across the horizontal vision slit.

'When they're clear, escort them back down the mountain to the Imperial lines,' Ahriman added. 'See to it quickly, but no harm is to come to them.

Understood?'

'We'll get it done,' BonGiovanni assured him, chopping his hand towards the doorway, and Ahriman heard clicking chirrups over the vox-pickups. The five lancers vanished into the darkness, stablights swiping left and right as they went deeper into the mountain.

'Why are we letting those mortals go in first?' asked Tolbek. 'If you're right and one of the shards of Magnus is below, then *we* should be the ones to find it.'

'If I am right, then we are in the midst of events that have mystified our Legion's scholars for decades.'

'What events?' asked Sanakht.

'Better you do not know,' said Ahriman. 'We walk a razored line where even the slightest deviation could have grave ramifications.'

Tolbek stepped in close to Ahriman, his fists ablaze.

'More damned secrets, Ahriman?' he hissed.

'Be warned, Tolbek,' said Sanakht, his blades half drawn.

The Pyrae adept rounded on the swordsman.

'Or what, you'll draw those pretty little blades fully, try to take me on? It'll take a better man than any of you to end *my* life.'

'Simmer down,' said Hathor Maat, placing a gauntlet on Tolbek's shoulder guard. 'There will be foes for your fire soon enough without having to turn it on your brothers.'

Tolbek shrugged off Hathor Maat's hand, heading towards the trilithon doorway in the mountain.

'You wait here if you want, but I'm going in,' he said.

'Tolbek! Wait!' called Ahriman, but the adept of the Pyrae ignored him and marched into the mountain. 'Damn it… Let's get after him before the fool ruins this entirely. Sanakht, wait here. Make sure there are no further arrivals and when those below return to the surface, ensure they are sent down the mountain alive.'

Sanakht nodded and drew his blades with a spinning flourish as Ahriman and Hathor Maat plunged into the mountain. Ahriman's auto-senses easily penetrated the dusty gloom of the tunnel, an ashlar-faced passageway leading to numerous galleries hung with caged lumens that fizzed and buzzed with sporadic power.

He caught up with Tolbek in a vaulted chamber of offering bowls and dusty statues as the passageway angled steeply downwards. It spiralled in an arc, descending to a depth of two hundred metres.

Ahriman heard arguing voices drift up from below, and irritation touched him that BonGiovanni hadn't yet managed to clear the cavern. He pulled ahead of his battle-brothers and reached the bottom of the passageway, entering a high-roofed shrine cavern. Twin statues of jade and gold with moonstone eyes pupilled with obsidian stood at its farthest end.

Sixteen mortals in conservators' robes stood in numb incomprehension, their hands raised as the Tupelov Lancers trained their rifles on them.

'Why are these civilians still here?' asked Ahriman.

No one answered, and Ahriman sighed. 'I asked a question,' he said.

'We're clearing them now, lord,' replied BonGiovanni.

'Hurry.'

The hussars began herding the bewildered mortals towards the chamber's exit. A few mumbled in protest, but their defiance was half-hearted, too cowed by the unexpected arrival of the Legiones Astartes.

One man took a hesitant step towards Ahriman, holding out a holographic pass-pad.

'Please,' he said in desperation. 'Please, we're licensed conservators. See?'

The hologram bloomed to life, but Ahriman didn't give it a second glance. He knew it was genuine, but didn't care.

'My lord, this is a profound discovery,' said the man. 'It is beyond value. It should be preserved for the benefit of future generations. My team has the expertise. The right equipment too. Please, lord.'

'This area is not safe,' said Ahriman. 'You will remove yourselves.'

'But–'

'I have given you an order, civilian.'

'My lord, which Legion do I have the honour of being protected by?'

'The Fifteenth.'

The man nodded. Clearly he knew who they were. Ahriman studied this man, feeling like he ought to know him.

Or maybe that he already did.

'What is your name?' he asked as the lancers led the rest of the mortals from the shrine, leaving only this solitary man behind. His eyes widened in awe as Hathor Maat and Tolbek entered the chamber.

'What is your name?' repeated Ahriman.

Reluctantly, the man's eyes returned to looking up at him and he replied, 'Hawser, lord. Kasper Hawser, conservator, assigned to–'

'Is that a joke?' asked Hathor Maat.

'What?' asked the man.

'Is that supposed to be a joke?'

'I don't understand, lord.'

'You told us your name,' pressed Hathor Maat with exasperation. 'Was it supposed to be a joke? Is it some nickname?'

'I don't understand. That's my name. Why would you think it's a joke?'

'Kasper Hawser?' said Ahriman, again feeling that this name should have significance to him beyond the obvious. 'You don't understand the reference?'

The man called Hawser shook his head. ‘No one’s ever…’

Ahriman turned his head and glanced at his companions before fixing his attention squarely on Hawser. ‘Clear the area.’

Hawser nodded and eased past Ahriman.

‘Once the security of this area can be guaranteed,’ said Ahriman, ‘your team may be permitted to resume its duties. You will evacuate to the safe zone and await notification.’

Hawser nodded, fleeing past Tolbek and Hathor Maat to rejoin his comrades. When the man was gone, an invisible weight seemed to lift from Ahriman’s shoulders, as if a moment of great import had passed before him in a fogged mirror. He’d sensed some connection between them, but no matter how he reached for it, the truth slithered from his grasp.

A moment of silence stretched as the three adepts of the Thousand Sons stared up at the towering statues before them, each finding different meaning in the stylised expressions carved in the stone by ancient hands.

‘So we’re here,’ said Tolbek. ‘Now what?’

Ahriman nodded towards the statues.

‘These conservators dared not damage these statues to learn what lay behind them and what they were protecting,’ he said. ‘We will not make that same mistake.’

‘Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?’ asked Hathor Maat.

Ahriman nodded and raised his hands. Aether-light ignited.

‘How are your Raptora powers?’

Every one of the Vorax and Ursarax opened fire at the same instant. A blitzing storm of lightning and volkite filled the arena, each automaton’s aim perfectly aligned to pass through where the shard of Magnus stood or harmlessly out of their circle if it were somehow to miss.

A heartbeat later, Bjarki dropped to one knee and slammed his fist against the ground. Fault-lines shot from the point of impact and a deafening shock wave buckled the air as a freezing pyre engulfed Magnus in a geyser of razored ice shards.

The primarch reeled, and his bellow of agony was music to Promus’ ears. The weapons fire of the cybernetics was a distraction only – a sleight of hand to obscure the true assault. Bjarki’s ice was blinding, and Promus charged through the coruscating psychic storm towards Magnus. Needles of ice sliced the surface of his plate.

His auto-senses were hazed with frost and storm-light, but he needed no mortal senses to see the Crimson King. The primarch’s soul-shard was a twisting titan of blinding illumination, the phosphorous silhouette of a giant.

Promus leapt and slashed his sword in a high, decapitating strike. A risky cut, but one that could end this fight before it truly began.

His searing blade cut the ice-filled air.

Magnus swayed aside, a fractional movement that would have been impossible for a being of flesh and blood, but this was no mortal opponent. Promus' blade passed a hair's breadth from Magnus' neck. The primarch spun on his heel as Promus landed, ducking to hammer his elbow into the Librarian's flank.

Burnished war-plate splintered under the awful force. Ribs broke and Promus felt bone fragments gouge the toughened meat of his lungs. The impact drove the breath from him, but he rode the blow and brought his sword back down in a lightning-fast reverse stroke.

Magnus parried it with his khopesh, hooking his blade's haft under Promus' guard to hammer its pommel into the former Ultramarine's chin.

Promus' head snapped back, his body tracing a perfect parabola as he flew through the air. Sinews strained to breaking point as his helmet split down its centre line. The crystalline matrix in his psy-hood shattered. He slammed into the sands, his vision a mire of static and fractured warning icons.

Promus blinked away the savage pain and reached up to tear off his ruined helm. The heat of Aghoru assailed him, even over the freezing residue of Bjarki's power. Cold filled him and he heard Wolves howling.

Ultramarian discipline asserted itself and he pushed himself to his feet. Gunfire and the clash of steel filled the arena. The actinic bite of the immaterium slithered over his skin.

Bjarki's warriors and Yasu Nagasena circled Magnus, like pack predators who, having run their prey to ground, were revelling in the last moment before the kill. That the Wolves allowed a mortal to fight alongside them was surprising. That he yet lived was doubly so.

They rushed the primarch en masse, going at him with no urge to duel or trade barbs, but simply to kill. Only Nagasena fought with finesse, but even his attacks were the purest expressions of simplicity and directness.

Magnus reeled under their brutal ferocity.

Light spilled from where each weapon struck, but none could land a killing blow. Magnus struck out and Svafnir Rackwulf went down on one knee, blood sheeting from his left leg. A bone-crunching boot to the chest hurled him back ten metres, his barbed harpoon spinning from his grip.

Bjarki fought with his frost blade and winter's lightning at his fingertips. Forking blasts punched into Magnus, splitting flares of warp essence into vapour. Gierlothnir Helblind swung his great axe two-handed like a veteran headsman.

Where the Wolves were pack predators, Nagasena was a striking snake, darting in to attack with pinpoint accuracy and blows that would slay a mortal thrice over.

Magnus fought each in turn, spinning, blocking and attacking like the Avenging Son himself. The primarch caught the haft of Helblind's descending weapon in one hand and jerked it forwards.

He pulled Helblind off balance, but the Wolf refused to relinquish his weapon. Magnus hacked his khopesh down. Promus threw himself into the fight as Magnus' blade clove into Helblind's chest. Searing electrical fire blazed from the wound and the Fenrisian roared in anger.

Even as he fell, he cursed Magnus.

'No!' yelled Bjarki and Magnus laughed at his pain.

Bjarki, Nagasena and Promus stood alone before the Crimson King, and the former Ultramarine realised how grossly they had underestimated the primarch's martial prowess. So much was made of his scholarly devotion to learning that they had forgotten the Lord of Prospero was still a warrior of sublime and terrible wrath.

Magnus read the realisation in his eyes and grinned.

'Is this how you thought this would end?' said Magnus.

Promus drew upon the iron discipline of Macragge and allowed the searing energies of the warp into his body.

'This isn't ended,' he said, thrusting his sword into the sky. A whipping, crackling arc of vivid blue energy lanced from the heavens towards his blade, the power to slay daemons and rip the fabric of space-time asunder.

The energy never reached him.

It bent aside at the last instant, drawn into Magnus' outstretched fist.

'You are a fool if you think you can best me in a contest of psychic mastery, Dio Promus,' said Magnus, his body a lightning rod at the heart of a storm. The primarch thrust his fist at Promus and the Librarian's war-plate split as enormous, crushing energies seized it. His plastron buckled as it compressed.

Bjarki and Nagasena renewed their attack. The Sigillite's man rolled left, slashing his blade at the primarch's hamstrings. Bjarki arced behind Magnus and called the powers of Fenris to his sword. It blazed with the coldest fires imaginable.

'For the Spear Inviter!' he yelled and thrust his sword hard and straight into Magnus' back. The blade burst from the centre of the primarch's chest and an eruption of prismatic light filled the arena. Magnus spun and brought his khopesh down in a brutal arc towards the Rune Priest's skull.

Bjarki roared and bared his fangs in the face of death.

And a pair of smoking wolves, one tar-black and the other snowdrift-white, unfolded from the air beside him. They leapt at the descending blade, ripping Magnus' arm backwards. They savaged the primarch of the Thousand Sons,

clawing and tearing and biting. Light burned from Magnus' wounds, but he spoke a word of power and the twin wolves exploded into cindered ash.

'Time to end this farce,' said Magnus, his body erupting in a burst of aether-fire. He thrust his arms out to the side, and a detonation of kinetic force billowed outwards in an irresistible psychic shock wave.

It threw Promus, Nagasena and Bjarki backwards like leaves in a hurricane. Promus hit the ground hard, twenty metres from the primarch. Behind him, the two magos of the Mechanicum watched the fight in the shadow of Olgyr Widdowsyn and the remembrancer, Lemuel Gaumon. He saw Sister Caesaria speak briefly to the Wolf, before she turned and rushed towards the battle.

He shook his head, trying to push himself upright.

'Magos!' he shouted. 'Shoot! Throne, *shoot!*'

Magnus laughed and Promus felt the heat of the primarch's boot pin him to the earth. 'You brought automata because you thought they would be the perfect soldiers to fight me? They are loyal to a fault, yes, but you forget one thing. No matter how much you surround them with iron, steel and plastic, there remains a kernel of human weakness at their core.'

Promus twisted to look over his shoulder at the painted battle-automata. Crackling, blood-red fire flickered around each cybernetic warrior as it turned and brought its guns to bear on their once-masters.

'Fire,' said Magnus.

The Thousand Sons plunged into the heart of the mountain, following a snaking path as it wound its way downwards for hundreds of metres. The thought that he trod pathways not known to mortals for over thirty millennia was intoxicating to Ahriman, and even the thought of the destruction of priceless statuary behind them did not trouble him overmuch.

'You are sure he is down here?' said Hathor Maat.

'I am,' said Ahriman with more certainty than he felt.

'You said that about Kamiti Sona,' pointed out Tolbek, though there was none of the bellicosity normally present in his remark.

'We found Mistress Shivani there. She was a link in the chain that has led us to this place. Surely you can see the cosmic resonance in that, Tolbek?'

'Of course I can,' sighed Tolbek, the fire from his palms casting a flickering orange glow onto the walls. 'I know you all think the Pyrae are simpletons because our powers are used for destruction more often than not. Yes, we are a simple, direct Fellowship, but we are Thousand Sons, and Masters Memphia and Cythega wrought no fools when they established our cult. I understand that nothing of our journey will be easy, but it vexes me not to see the path.'

'Trust me, brother, it vexes the Corvidae more.'

Tolbek grunted with laughter, a sound so incongruous that it brought them all up short. A sense of brotherhood swept through Ahriman, a feeling he had not truly felt since before the Council of Nikaea.

It seemed his brothers felt that same confraternity, even the normally viperous Hathor Maat.

'We are a fine host, are we not?' said the adept of the Pavoni. 'We were made brothers by gene-wrights, wrought into warriors by necessity and made companions by the vagaries of betrayal. Who among us would ever have seen fit to put *us* together as the saviours of the Legion?'

'Our father did,' said Ahriman, holding his hand out to Hathor Maat. 'And I would have it no other way. We are all here, brothers, our fates forever bound until our deaths. I would die for any of you.'

Hathor Maat ignored Ahriman's proffered hand and simply said, 'And I for you all, brothers.'

'As would I,' said Tolbek.

With their brotherhood renewed, the legionaries pressed onwards. Ahriman ran his fingers along the moist walls, cut with angular letters of ancient provenance. Mere graffiti, or the writings of a wandering king? More pressingly, Ahriman sought an answer to why he had felt the need to speak words of brotherhood he did not feel. Power was at work here, but it was a subtle power, smoothing out the rougher edges of their abrasive psyches.

He tried not to let hope get ahead of him, remembering his disappointment when the mission to Kamiti Sona had not yielded a fragment of their gene-sire.

'A question occurs,' said Hathor Maat, breaking his train of thought.

'What?'

'Does anyone know exactly when our father and Perturabo came this way? They explored these mountains together, did they not? Searching for the very place in which we walk.'

'They did,' agreed Ahriman. 'The primarch never told me the exact dates, only that it was in the aftermath of the Yeselti refinery fields burning. The fires spread to the mountain and the entire range burned for decades.'

'Then could we wait here?' asked Hathor Maat. 'Perhaps we might warn them both of what is to come.'

'And they would believe us?' said Tolbek.

'If anyone might it would be them.'

Ahriman halted and shook his head. 'The Corvidae once held great conclaves to debate such matters, asking whether it was possible or even desirable to change the past. Or, even if it was possible, could anyone ever know it had happened or would they simply assimilate the new timeline as their own? Those who believed it possible spoke of the great travellers, Titor and Ambersen, and the great

disasters of the past they were said to have averted. Their opponents spoke of how the actions attributed to those travellers almost always resulted in timelines more chaotic than those they were said to have replaced. Besides, Magnus *already* tried to warn the Emperor of Horus Lupercal's betrayal, and that brought the Sixth to Prospero as our executioners. No, Sanakht, if an earlier incarnation of our father is close by, we should not seek him out. The consequences are never worth what transient benefit we might think to gain.'

Hathor Maat nodded, but Ahriman saw the notion of seeking to alter the future's path still held appeal for the warrior.

They delved into the mountain for another hour before finally reaching its deepest vault, a hexagonal library chamber with every wall aside from the one they had entered filled with bookshelves that groaned with the weight of the knowledge carried upon them.

At the exact centre of the chamber, heaped with books and scrolls, was a circular table. A man was reading there, and he looked up in welcome as the three legionaries entered.

His robe was crimson, edged in gold and with a coif of silver mail at his shoulders. His features were handsome, those of a great king, and his raven hair was pulled into a long scalp lock that fell to the small of his back. A long, braided beard hung from his chin, bound by three copper rings.

'Who are you?' asked Ahriman as the man carefully closed his book and put it face down on the table. He held a hand out to a chair opposite him, a chair Ahriman swore hadn't been there only moments before.

'I am King Kadmus,' said the man. 'Mistress Shivani warned me you would be coming, Ahzek Ahriman.'

Lemuel had once endured an electrical storm on the Azaka-Tonnerre ferro-plains of Nordafrik, travelling east with a convoy of desperate people on the trail of an elusive *sangoma* said to have miraculous powers…

A sudden darkening of the sky had been the first warning. A gathering expeditionary fleet passing overhead in low orbit, its sheer mass of steel disrupting already volatile atmospherics with electromagnetic squalls. The convoy's mounted guides scattered, putting as much distance between the metal-rich environment of the convoy and themselves as possible.

Deafening peals of thunder shook the earth and a heartbeat later the storm raced in on stalking legs of lightning. It filled the air with light and fury. The first vehicles were incinerated in a blinding flash of magnesium-bright light. Explosions marched down the convoy as fuel cells detonated and external promethium tanks exploded in whooshing plumes of fire. Screams of panic were drowned out by relentless whipcracks of lightning.

Lemuel and his fellow pilgrims ran for cover, but the storm was unrelenting and there was no shelter to be found. Nine hours later, Lemuel and two others crawled out from under a pyre of blackened corpses.

He had relived that night a thousand times in his dreams.

Never had he thought he would re-experience it.

Olgyr Widdowsyn lay sprawled atop him, the sheer mass of the Space Wolf's body pinning him in place. He didn't know if the warrior was alive or dead. The last thing Lemuel had seen was Widdowsyn's smoking war-plate as it barrelled into him and sheets of blazing lightning erupting from the cybernetics.

He'd hit the ground hard, crying out in pain and terror as the braces supporting his legs buckled under the legionary's weight. He was lying on his front, struggling for breath. Lemuel couldn't see what was happening.

Why had the automata opened fire on them?

He heard roars of pain and the awful stench of roasting flesh. Lemuel wept as he felt the crushing claustrophobia of being pinned beneath the dying bodies on Azaka-Tonnerre.

His breath came in shallow hikes, his lungs unable to inflate. Olgyr Widdowsyn was slowly crushing the life out of him. He struggled to pull himself free, but Widdowsyn was hundreds of kilos of dead weight. He heard someone call his name and looked up.

Grey fog hazed his eyes, his vision narrowing to a spot of light in the far distance.

Was this death?

Lemuel had always feared this moment. He had raged against his wife's terminal illness, traversing the globe many times over in search of a cure for her sickness.

Now that death was coming for him he found he was not afraid. Was this what Malika had known when she begged him not to waste their last days in a futile search for a cure?

A grey shadow moved before him. He couldn't see it clearly.

Lemuel struggled to focus, blinking away tears.

A young boy reaching for him, a tiny hand extended.

His eyes were empty and dead, a purple-yellow weal around his neck where his mother had strangled him.

I as good as put my hands on his neck.

The boy reached out to him. *What was he called?*

A slew of names flashed into Lemuel's mind. Unknown names. Places, people or things, he could not tell.

Pharos. Phaeron.

No. Pheres. Yes, Pheres – that was it.

‘Leave me,’ hissed Lemuel with his last breath. ‘I killed you. I killed you…’

‘No,’ said a voice too deep and too resonant to be that of a youth. ‘You may yet save us all.’

The boy grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and pulled. Astonishingly, Lemuel felt himself moving, dragged out from beneath the crushing weight of Widdowsyn’s prostrate form. Lemuel fought against the boy’s strength, knowing that only more pain awaited him in this world.

Breath heaved back into Lemuel’s lungs, a sucking draught of electrically charged air. Lightning danced around him, a crackling dome of it rippling overhead. His vision blurred with the rush of oxygen to his brain.

He stumbled, but the boy held him upright.

No, not a boy.

The warrior of the Thousand Sons sat him upright, ripping open his tunic. Agony flared along his legs and up his spine. Lemuel blinked away tears of pain and twisted in his saviour’s grip. Muttering to himself, the warrior moved his hands across Lemuel’s chest as if searching for injuries. Lemuel felt wetness and looked down. Blood covered his skin, dripping down his chest from where the warrior had touched him.

‘What are you doing?’ he gasped.

‘Hold still,’ said the legionary, glancing over his shoulder. ‘I don’t have long.’

Lemuel followed his gaze and his heart hammered in terror.

In the heart of the arena, Magnus was ablaze with light.

The Crimson King floated with his feet angled downwards, a metre above sand that was even now turning to glass. His armour burned like molten gold, too bright to look upon. His arms were outstretched and light flared from them like the wings of an avenging angel come down from some celestial realm to wreak vengeance upon a disloyal kingdom.

Any semblance of corporeality was shed now at battle’s end. This Magnus needed no flesh; he was immaterial energy unbound.

And this was but a shard of a greater whole.

Bodies lay strewn around the primarch – bodies of flesh and blood. Bodies of iron and ceramite. Mortal, Mechanicum and Legion. The Wolf pack lay broken. Sister Caesaria lay still, her armour a smoking, molten ruin.

Even Promus and Nagasena were down.

Dead or alive, Lemuel couldn’t tell.

The legionary shook him, his gaze unrelenting.

‘Are you a good man?’ asked the Thousand Sons legionary.

‘What?’

‘Quickly. Are you a good man?’

‘No,’ said Lemuel.

‘Were you *ever* a good man?’

‘Once, maybe. I don’t know,’ said Lemuel.

The warrior shrugged and said, ‘For both our sakes, I hope that will be enough.’

He hauled Lemuel to his feet as Magnus drifted towards them.

‘Menkaura,’ said the Crimson King. ‘Of course it would be you. Who else of my sons might glimpse what was to come?’

‘Only Ahriman. Or maybe Amon,’ said Menkaura, and Lemuel felt the tip of the legionary’s thumb tracing a cursive pattern on the back of his neck, an ever-decreasing spiral. ‘But they are too blinded by love to see the truth. And even had they seen what I saw, they would not have had the courage to try to stop you.’

Magnus circled in the air, surveying the carnage around him.

‘Malcador’s finest could not do that,’ he said. ‘What makes you think you can?’

‘Because, like you, I was a diligent student,’ said Menkaura. ‘And I too have delved into proscribed texts.’

Lemuel twisted in Menkaura’s grip, lifting his hands to shield them from the star-bright radiance of the primarch’s soul-shard. He had sat in the presence of Magnus the Red before, heard him tell tales of lost Prospero, but this was not the same person. This was no grand, fatherly raconteur; this was the fiery aspect of Magnus consumed by anger, bitterness and hate.

‘Please,’ he sobbed, hearing Menkaura whisper strange words that made him flinch. ‘Don’t.’

‘What is that?’ said Magnus, his form rippling with aether-fire and his eye narrowing as he caught the scent of something awry. ‘The *Malus Codicium?*’

‘*In servitutem abduco…*’ began Menkaura.

Magnus flew at his son in a rage.

‘*Don’t you dare…*’

Killing light blazed from his clawed hands.

Menkaura pressed his thumb hard into the back of Lemuel’s neck, completing the spiral pattern he had been tracing.

‘I bind thee fast forever into this host!’ yelled Menkaura.

Lemuel screamed as Magnus swept them into his fiery embrace.

He felt himself falling.

His will tore away, unhoused from its seat of consciousness. A deposed king of his own flesh.

Lemuel was falling, falling into *himself, dropping into an abyssal chasm from which there could be no return.*

But he did not fall alone.

He fell with a fiery angel.

Ahzek Ahriman, Chief Librarian of the Thousand Sons Legion

EIGHTEEN

Kadmus
Bindings
Renewed

Ahriman sat opposite the great king. He blinked away a shimmer of aether-fire haloing the man's head and moved his mind into the fourth enumeration as he studied his face. The man's bone structure was unusual, which was to be expected from a face millennia distant from his own. The king's olive skin was smooth, his dark hair neatly trimmed and his beard freshly oiled.

He was the very image of King Kadmus.

Yet it was the eyes that revealed the truth.

The light of wheeling galaxies danced in the depths of each iris, the gleam of vast knowledge that could never be entirely obscured. Power clung to this mortal disguise, locked away behind a will of iron, but there nonetheless.

'Do you like my library?' asked King Kadmus. 'I have nearly ten thousand books, gathered from all across the empire. There are works of all the great scholars of Thebes and Samothrace, and even a scholarly work from Sparta, if you can believe that! One is even bound in the hide of the dragon I slew at the Ismenian spring.'

'A dragon?'

'A fierce beast indeed,' said the king, placing a long, serpent-carved heqa staff on the table. 'It killed a great many of my people before I was able to bring it down and sow its teeth.'

'The birth of the Spartoi,' said Ahriman, intrigued despite the sudden appearance of a staff from thin air.

'But slaying the beast was a deed I would come to rue.'

'How so?' asked Ahriman, knowing he could not indulge his father's delusion for much longer.

'Unbeknownst to me, the serpent was sacred to Ares, and the war-god cursed my rule with ill-fortune, plagues, rebellions and war.'

'You were not the only one to sow the teeth of the dragon, were you?' said Ahriman, baiting the trap.

'No. Iason, the centaur's stepson, took some with him from Thessaly and sowed them in Colchis…'

The king's eyes flickered at his careless mention of that ancient place. Its namesake was a similarly blighted place, where dark mutterings of gods and cults had twisted a brother once dear to Magnus.

Ahriman leaned forwards and placed his hands palms down on the table. He stared into the king's eyes, seeking to appeal to his gene-sire lurking behind them.

'Father, it is time to come home,' he said.

'I *am* home,' said Kadmus. 'This is where I belong, cataloguing my books and making sure I memorise every one. If I can commit one book to memory every day, then it will only take a little under thirty years to read them all.'

His words trailed off. 'But each time I finish one, three more appear. It is most confusing. There is so much to learn, so much to know. My greatest fear is that I will not live to know them all.'

'You said something similar within the Obsidian Tower,' said Ahriman.

'The Obsidian Tower? Is that in Phoenicia?'

'No, it is your sanctum upon the Planet of the Sorcerers.'

The king's features darkened and he opened his book once again. How long could Magnus maintain this cognitive dissonance? How long before this facade cracked and the colossal power behind the mask was revealed? What fury might be unleashed when this fantasy became unsustainable? As dangerous as it might be, Ahriman knew he had to irrevocably shatter his father's fiction.

'Now you are trying to confuse me,' said the king, staring intently at the pages of his book, his hands curling into fists. 'I know of no such place. You should go now, I think.'

'I am not leaving here without you, father,' said Ahriman.

'Mistress Shivani warned me you would seek to make me your prisoner,' said Kadmus, scanning the pages of the book. 'I told her she was wrong. I told her my sons would only come as fellow seekers after knowledge.'

Ahriman hid his excitement at the king's acknowledgement of him as one of his sons. He reached across the table and placed his hand atop the book the king was reading.

'We do not have long, father. The past is obdurate and does not tolerate things that ought not to be here. If you stay, you will become a formless ghost. I beg you, come with me. I can make you whole again.'

The king shook his head, fear and anger warring on his features. Ahriman drew back his hand as he saw the latter emotion gain the ascendency.

'I should have listened to Mistress Shivani,' said King Kadmus. 'She told me to kill you as soon as I saw you.'

The ancient king rose from the table and swept up his staff, its length shimmering as it filled with aether power. His form expanded as the demigod within shed its illusory refuge in scraps of disintegrating mist. Olive skin

darkened to ruddy crimson and hair grew wild as his eyes swelled to become one great orb that swam with colours known and unseen.

The shard of Magnus stood revealed, robed as the peerless scholar Ahriman remembered from their many sojourns in the towering libraries of Tizca. Though a fragment of a much greater whole, this Magnus could still destroy them all.

He had a momentary sense of aether build-up before a wave of pure force erupted from the primarch. It hurled the three of them back against the bookshelves. Timber splintered under the impact and books fell in a rain of parchment and worn leather.

Tolbek was first to his feet, his aura blazing with the instinctive urge to strike back. Flames built at his fists.

'Stop!' commanded Ahriman. 'We are not here to fight.'

Hathor Maat plunged the air around Tolbek's fire to sub-zero levels and the flames died instantly. The Pyrae adept rounded on him, but the gleaming serpent-wound staff of his gene-sire flashed into the space between them.

The three legionaries faced their primarch, awed by the sheer majesty of his being. *This* was their primarch as they wished him to be, aglow with knowledge and the wisdom to wield it, vibrant, energised and sure of purpose.

'My lord,' said Ahriman, dropping to one knee. The others followed his example. 'We are your sons, and we are here to help.'

'I do not need your help,' said Magnus, lowering his staff.

'But we need *yours,*' said Ahriman. 'The Legion is dying, just as you are dying.'

'You are wrong,' said Magnus.

'No,' said Ahriman. 'Without us, you will fade until nothing remains, and without our father, we will wither on the vine, doomed to madness and mutation.'

'If that is true, then I can do nothing to change that fate. Nobody can.'

'I refuse to accept that,' said Ahriman, rising slowly to his feet. 'You are Magnus the Red! You are the Crimson King, Master of Prospero, and the greatest mind the galaxy has ever known. There is *nothing* beyond your reach.'

The primarch shook his head.

'I once thought as you do, my son,' he said. 'I believed I knew everything, that I was more enlightened than any of my brothers. More visionary than even my father. How foolish that now seems – how arrogant. There is *always* more to know, more to learn, and every act of learning must come with the humility to know that however much is learned, it is never enough…'

'Is that why you remain here, hiding in an ancient library like a coward?'

'Do you seek to anger me, Ahzek?'

'Would that help?'

‘No,’ said Magnus, turning and walking around the edge of the library, running his fingers over the spines of the priceless texts. ‘This aspect of me is beyond anger, beyond jealousy and bitterness. It is the part of me that seeks knowledge simply for the sake of its acquisition. It is the part of me that felt your discord as you drew near and sought to heal the rifts between you. I hoped it would allow you to avoid the fates awaiting you at one another’s hands.’

At least Ahriman now knew from whence had come the gift of brotherhood in the passage through the mountain.

He stepped towards Magnus. ‘It is that aspect of my father we need most. The portion of your psyche that remains on the Planet of the Sorcerers is breaking apart. He feels the great geometries of his mind unravelling with every passing breath. He acts as you do, trying to remember all that was lost on Prospero, but it is impossible in his splintered state. Only when you are made whole again can we be restored.’

‘I am sorry, Ahzek,’ said Magnus, turning to face him once more, ‘but I… I cannot return. All I see on that path is an eternity of war and horror, death and torment. It is inevitable that all great things must end so why fight it?’

Ahriman slammed his fist down on the table.

‘Because some things are worth fighting for!’ he cried. ‘The end may come, yes, but we will not allow the galaxy to fall to ignorance without a struggle. We will rage at the death of reason sweeping humanity and hold fast to the lone torch of illumination as darkness closes in. It may be extinguished, it may be torn down by the baying, idiot mob, but at least we will have kept it aloft and alight as long as possible. Can you say the same, father? Hiding alone in a library that will soon be burned to ash?’

Ahriman paused as he saw his father’s look of shock.

‘Yes, this mountain and all within it will soon be ash. You don’t remember?’

‘No,’ said Magnus. ‘I… I do not.’

Ahriman nodded and stepped around the circular table. ‘Soon these mountains will be ablaze from the archipelago towers of the Aegean Valley to the Gulf of Lepanto. Nothing will remain of the great king’s works, but *you* will endure. You will remain alone in the darkness below Mount Cithaeron with nothing but dust and cinders pouring through your fingers until your spirit is naught but breath on the wind.’

Magnus circled in opposition to him, and it broke Ahriman’s heart to see his father so distraught. His father turned to look at the books stacked on the walls, reaching for them as, one by one, they began to fade like echoes receding into the past.

‘I can’t hold on to them,’ said Magnus, sinking to his knees as a tear ran down his bronzed cheek. ‘I can feel them fading. Like old friends walking away into a

fog…’

Ahriman reached his father and placed a hand upon his shoulder, feeling the profound grief wracking his immaterial body. To feel every aspect of your soul peeling away, layer by layer, memory by memory… That was a new death every day.

He held his heqa staff out to Magnus.

‘Come back with me, father,’ he said.

Magnus nodded and gripped the ebony staff.

‘You will bring me back to what I was?’ he asked.

‘I will,’ promised Ahriman.

‘Then I will come with you.’

And the soul-shard of Magnus poured into Ahriman.

Ahriman opened his eyes and gasped to see the world as he had never seen it before. He stood once again in the Halls of Extinction, on the banks of the flowing dark river. Its waters were aflame with coruscating temporal energies that burned like the deepest cold of the void.

He stumbled away from the water’s edge and would have fallen but for the steadying arm of Hathor Maat. Ahriman flinched at the contact, seeing a momentary flash, like twin comets of light blazing from the warrior.

Ahriman heard voices. Muted, idiot things. He felt bodies in motion around him, slow-moving sacks of witless meat and bone encased in brittle skin-shells that could be so easily unmade. He lurched away from their abrasive voices, weaving and stumbling like a drunk, blinking away after-images of existences spent at a thousand times the speed of life.

The power filling him was magnificent and unimaginable.

Ahriman saw all the sharp edges of the world. Everything was too clear, too bright and too *real* for him to process.

He saw a million details in every glance.

The ever-diminishing fractal edges of the rocks.

Iridescent rainbows within the spray of water droplets.

Music in the black river of future, past and present.

‘I can see everything…’ gasped Ahriman. ‘I *feel* it…’

The sensory overload was too much.

He fled, as if he could somehow outrun the barrage of noise and light. His mind buckled under the weight of so much input. The fragile synaptic network within his meat brain was incapable of enduring this unending torrent of information.

I will spare you this burden, my son, said the voice of his sire in his skull.

+Father? Is this how you see the world?+ asked Ahriman.

A measure of it.

+How can you stand it? How can anyone contain such power without letting it control them?+

You want to know why, if I had such power, would I not wield it?

+Yes…+ Ahriman gasped.

Godly power is at my fingertips every day, the ability to create and destroy in the same breath… To own such singular power and not use it is the greatest strength of all.

+I do not have your strength,+ said Ahriman.

My mind's architecture is not yours, agreed Magnus, his voice already fading to a ghostly whisper. ***My sons were never meant to see as I do. If you will let me, I will take what was not meant for you to see.***

+Yes,+ begged Ahriman. +Take it. Take it from me, please!+

Instantly, the onslaught faded and Ahriman let out a gasping, drowning-man's breath. His chest heaved with the exertion of bearing a spirit far greater than his own, as comforting filters veiled his eyes from vistas not meant for mortals.

Even as it was killing him, tears spilled down his face at the thought that this connection to his father was over.

'Ahriman?' said a voice at his shoulder, and he recoiled at the ugliness of its sounds, the grunting bovine cadences of its vocalisation. Even that began to fade, and a knife of grief stabbed into his heart at its loss.

Ahriman felt the presence of Sanakht, Hathor Maat and Tolbek standing behind him. He tasted ash and metal as Aforgomon took a step towards him.

'Get away from me, daemon,' snapped Ahriman, looking around him. A grey fog smeared his vision, his eyes transitioning from seeing everything to almost nothing. All that was certain was that he was no longer in the library of King Kadmus.

'Where are we?' he asked, his own voice no less ugly than that of his brothers.

'Back where we started,' said Sanakht. 'In the Hall of Extinction.'

'The Reckoner?' asked Ahriman.

'Gone,' answered Hathor Maat. 'If he was ever truly here.'

Ahriman forced himself to stand, using his heqa staff for balance. He felt its power, and elation surged through him as he saw it was no longer ebon-black, but ivory-white.

Every one of them could sense the power it contained.

'You succeeded,' said Aforgomon with undisguised anticipation.

'The shard of Magnus…' said Hathor Maat, shaking his head in disbelief. 'Throne, we did it. We actually *did* it!'

'Yes,' said Ahriman, feeling the inhuman potential of what he now bore. 'We did.'

‘It’s about time something went right for us,’ snarled Tolbek, turning back towards the entrance. ‘Now let’s get off this bloody rock and be on our way.’

The gunship filled with the reek of blood and burned metal as the wounded Gierlothnir Helblind flew the Stormbird through the atmosphere towards the *Doramaar*. Its troop compartment bore the dead of the Mechanicum, the ruin of their mission and also their prize. Sister Caesaria’s life was pouring out of her, and Yasu Nagasena remained unconscious with a fist-sized swelling upon his right temple.

Olgyr Widdowsyn tended them as best he could, battling to stabilise bodies, the mortal workings of which he had only the most rudimentary knowledge.

Promus could spare the wounded none of his attention.

He and Bödvar Bjarki fought a different battle.

Bjarki pressed both his hands down on Lemuel Gaumon’s right shoulder as the man thrashed beneath him. Promus held the remembrancer’s other shoulder, and both warriors required their entire weight to pin him down.

Menkaura sat astride Lemuel, one hand holding his throat, the other cutting bloody runes into the skin of his bare chest with the tip of a combat dagger. Standing behind him was Svafnir Rackwulf, the muzzle of his bolt pistol pressed against the sorcerer’s neck. With Sister Caesaria’s life hanging in the balance, a bolt to the head was the only real threat they had.

‘Hold him still, damn you!’ yelled Menkaura. ‘The binding invocatus must be precise or they will not hold!’

The remembrancer’s body burned furnace-hot, and was slicked with sweat and blood. His ruddy skin squirmed with motion as the spirit Menkaura had trapped fought to free itself. The thing within Lemuel roared obscenities and chewed his lips to shredded meat. He spat blood in the Wolf’s face, laughing as he cursed his mother and father.

‘The spirit of our enemy is bound,’ snarled Bjarki. ‘Why are we not killing this thing?’

‘Because we need him,’ shot back Menkaura.

A growl built in Bjarki’s throat. ‘Why should I trust the word of a traitor?’

‘Because I am the only reason you yet live,’ snapped Menkaura as Lemuel bucked beneath them like a grox-mare in heat. His lips drew back in a rictus grin, and bloodied spittle flew from his stretched mouth. Menkaura leaned in close and spoke unintelligibly profane words that scraped along Promus’ spine like rusted razors.

‘What in the Allfather’s name are you doing?’ yelled Bjarki.

‘Saving us!’ retorted Menkaura.

‘Let him work, Bjarki,’ said Promus through gritted teeth.

It went against everything he had been taught to let Menkaura perform such an abominable ritual, but what choice did they have? What was one more sin to be added to his tally?

Bjarki bared his fangs, veins bulging at his neck and forehead. Fury blazed from him, and he glared at Promus as though he blamed him personally for the slaughter on the mountain.

'Listen to your friend,' snapped Menkaura, twisting the blade in Lemuel's chest and drawing an inhuman screech of anger from somewhere deep inside him. 'Now be silent and let me finish this before the soul-shard can escape!'

'When this is done I will kill you, sorcerer,' promised Bjarki. 'This is evil knowledge. It is maleficarum!'

'My *evil* knowledge will save us all.'

Bjarki growled, shaking his head in disbelief. 'And you dare ask why the Wolves were loosed…'

Promus saw Menkaura control his resentment only with the greatest effort. For the briefest second, he almost admired the warrior's restraint.

'One day you will be glad of what I know,' said Menkaura.

'That day will never come,' said Bjarki as the sorcerer made a final cut in Lemuel's abdomen and the man instantaneously went limp beneath them. A final breath, like the death rattle of a corpse, escaped his bloodied lips.

'Is it done?' asked Promus.

Menkaura nodded and reversed his grip on the combat knife, extending it towards him. Promus warily released Lemuel's shoulder and glanced over at Bjarki. The Space Wolf nodded and snatched the knife from Menkaura's hand. He rose swiftly and pulled Menkaura to his feet, pushing him up against the gunship's fuselage. He pressed the tip of the blade under the enemy legionary's jaw, ready to drive it up into his brain.

'Bjarki!' cried Promus. 'No!'

'Give me one reason why I let him live!'

'I can help you find the other shards before my brother legionaries,' said Menkaura.

Bjarki shook his head. 'You will betray us. The first chance you get you will feed us to the wights of the Underverse.'

'Then go ahead and kill me,' said Menkaura. 'Please. You will be sparing me a life of endless sorrow and pain.'

'Bjarki, don't,' said Promus, his hand sliding towards his own blade. Blood ran down the skin of Menkaura's neck as the blade bit flesh.

'Release him!' shouted Promus. 'Now!'

For a moment, he thought the Wolf would ignore his order and drive the blade up into the vault of Menkaura's skull.

The moment stretched.

Bjarki threw back his head and loosed an ululating howl that echoed mournfully throughout the gunship. He hurled the blade aside and gripped Menkaura's shoulders, as though to embrace a brother. Instead, he slammed his forehead into the centre of Menkaura's face. The Thousand Sons legionary slid down the fuselage to the deck, his face a bloody mask.

'Svafnir Rackwulf,' he said, pointing at the slumped warrior. 'Keep that spear of yours jammed hard against his chest. If he so much as whispers, drive it home as you would into the heart of a *hrosshvalur.*'

Sickness that was not sickness but something far worse cramped Hathor Maat's belly as he lurched along the darkened corridor below the waterline of the *Osiris Panthea.* Spending so long beyond the Black Ship's protective Geller field had been foolish, and the flesh change was intensifying its assault on his form.

He pressed a hand to his belly, feeling the skin beneath ripple with ambition to change and grow into new and ever more horrific forms. The Great Ocean pressed in on the ship as it hurtled onwards, following a heading of the newly empowered Ahriman.

Hathor Maat groaned, pausing to lean against a wide bulkhead. Wanly glowing lumens stretched down the companionway, barely enough to light the symbols etched onto the shuttered doors of the prisoner holds to either side.

Sweat poured from him. He let out a breath that burned his throat. His skin was fevered with the roiling motion in his cells. Toxic bile rose in his gullet.

He bit back the urge to vomit and pressed on.

His steps became ever more irregular as the bones shifted within the meat of his body. Dizziness swamped him as sensory inputs formed at random across his body, eyes bursting like pustules on his neck and back. Taste organs formed at his fingertips and upon the soles of his feet.

He tried to count the number of shuttered doors he passed, but his mind burned with pain and the effort of holding back the genetic rebellion within his flesh. He had no idea how far he'd come.

Had he passed eight or nine?

Hathor Maat looked to see if he'd reached the right shutter, but gummed matter clogged his vision. He wiped the back of his hand over his eyes. It came away sticky with webbed residue. He rubbed his palm on his leg armour and exerted a measure of his Pavoni powers to gain clarity enough to examine the door.

Unmarked, save for the symbology of the Silent Sisterhood.

'Yes,' he said, his voice a wet, rasping slur utterly unlike his normal perfectly modulated tone. 'This must be the tenth.'

He reached for the shutter release controls, but his legs gave way beneath him. He slid down the door, feeling the curse within him revel in the weakening of his

power to hold it back. Had he not been an adept of the Pavoni, he would have succumbed to its aberrant evolution long before now.

Hathor Maat lifted an arm that was bending and cracking in unnatural ways, but the controls were too far out of reach. Acidic tears spilled down his cheeks, the skin melting beneath it all the way to bone.

'No,' he gurgled. 'I can't die like this.'

'I'm told you won't,' said a voice behind him as hands reached down to haul him to his feet. 'I think it still needs you.'

Hathor Maat squinted through his blurred vision to see the armoured form of the Emperor's Children swordsman. His bone-white hair and psy-sculpted features looked down on him with a sardonic grin. Whether it was the fire in his brain or riot of his thoughts, he could not tell, but Hathor Maat thought he saw two twisting, sinuous forms within Lucius' body.

'Why… are… you here?' he managed.

'I'm here to keep you alive,' said Lucius, opening the hatch and dragging him inside. Hathor Maat felt his back squirm with tumorous growths, spouting like fungi. He screamed in pain, his powers useless in the face of his rapid mutations.

'Hold on,' said Lucius. 'All that you need is here.'

Hathor Maat squinted through the myriad images overlaying his mind. Like the previous nine compartments, this one was packed with at least a hundred damned souls. Cowed, starving, diseased and filthy from weeks of the Thousand Sons' neglect.

'Just as it showed you, remember?' said Lucius.

Hathor Maat nodded, his mouth and tongue too grossly swollen and distended now to speak. Whether it was the nearness of his salvation or some last reserve of untapped resolve, he would never know, but Hathor Maat found the strength to lurch towards the terrified captives.

He dropped to his knees before an unmoving man whose body was malnourished to the point of being skeletal. He looked up at Hathor Maat with sympathy in his eyes.

The mortal's pity infuriated him and he plunged his hands into the man's stomach. Eye-tipped fingers pierced suddenly soft flesh and, voicing the alien words Aforgomon had taught him, Hathor Maat *pushed.*

The effects were instantaneous.

The man convulsed as his flesh bulged and stretched. Rampant growth all but turned him inside out in a heartbeat. A rain of aerosolised blood sprayed Hathor Maat as he felt the treachery within him diminish.

Reinvigorated, he moved on to another man, this one with enough fear-born strength to back away. Hathor Maat did not give him the chance and pushed yet

more of his mutations out of his body. The man expired seconds later, vomiting a great gout of blood over Hathor Maat.

Exhilarated at his success, he crawled towards another victim. A shadow fell across him.

'No, take this one,' said Lucius, throwing a frightened adolescent next to him. 'This one's flesh is younger and more resilient than those others.'

Hathor Maat nodded and thrust both his hands into the weeping boy's belly. He poured mutation after mutation into him until the gibbering, mewling flesh-sac was unrecognisable as having once been human.

'More,' said Hathor Maat. 'I need more.'

The shutter slammed down. Once it had been a cargo hold. Now it was a charnel tomb. Nothing remained alive within.

Hathor Maat's skin was radiant, smooth and vital. His body was that of a legionary in his prime, easily the equal of Fulgrim's warrior. The strength filling him was like his memory of his first day as a legionary – where there was not a foe in the galaxy he could not personally defeat.

He took a deep breath and stretched his arms before him.

'Throne, I feel *alive!*' he said.

Lucius reached back and set the automatic expulsion controls on the hold. The *whoosh* of purging fire incinerating the hundreds of corpses within pushed the shutter outwards in its frame. A moment later, the shutter was sucked inwards as the ashen contents were vented into the void.

Hathor Maat turned his hands over before him, checking for any sign that even a sliver of the flesh change was still upon him. He found nothing and grinned.

'I am beautiful again,' he said.

'You are,' Lucius grudgingly agreed, 'but you and I both know that beauty comes at a price.'

'Anything.'

The swordsman let out a guttural bark of laughter.

'It said that's what you'd say,' said Lucius. 'Just be sure that when the time comes to pay, you don't back away from that promise. You can't escape this debt.'

'Have no fear,' said Hathor Maat with a sneer of withering scorn. 'Whatever its damned price, I'll pay it gladly.'

Lucius stepped closer to Hathor Maat.

'That big damned book Ahriman carries around,' he said.

'The *Book of Magnus?* What of it?' said Hathor Maat, taking a step back.

'We're going to change it,' said Lucius.

NINETEEN

Aoshun
Ankhu Anen
In extremis

Yasu Nagasena did not like the *Arethusa.*

The vessel was cloaked in falsehoods, its purpose veiled as if ashamed. He had felt it the first time he came aboard, and felt it still. If anything, the feeling was stronger now.

Everything about this ship was cold and lifeless, its systems kept functional largely by a crew of automata and the bare minimum of mortal crewmen.

Neither Nagasena nor Promus wished to linger over Aghoru, so the *Arethusa* and *Doramaar* had remained only long enough to bombard the great mountain and utterly obliterate the Crimson King's arena. Now both ships hung in low orbit around a nameless gas giant in a nearby subsector, bereft of a destination.

The source that had led them to Aghoru could no longer be safely consulted.

Not yet, at least.

A pair of weaponless automata escorted Nagasena from the embarkation deck, but he kept a wary eye on them nevertheless, his right hand never straying far from the grip of his volkite pistol. The cybernetics' betrayal on Aghoru had cost them greatly, and despite Umwelt Uexküll's assurance that he had purged every machine's memory core, Nagasena knew that a thing that turned once could turn again.

Nagasena had transferred to the *Arethusa* at the request of Dio Promus. He did not know what the former Librarian of Ultramar wanted, but had no wish for any drama to play out before others, so had come alone.

At length, the twin automata brought him to a simple shuttered door on one of the vessel's upper decks. They halted to either side and took up flanking positions like silent praetorians.

The shutter rose and Promus gave a curt bow of welcome, dressed in a simple training robe.

'Yasu,' he said, stepping back. 'Thank you for coming.'

Nagasena returned the bow and entered a moderately sized stateroom. Its furnishings were minimal and practical, as would be expected of a warrior wrought by Ultramar.

A simple cot-bed that looked as though it had never been used, a series of cloth-covered workbenches, a reading desk and plotting tables had all been pushed to the walls. A simple calisthenics mat filled the centre of the room, and the broken machine limbs of at least half a dozen shattered sparring servitors lay heaped in the corner of the room.

Nagasena smelt sweat, machine oil and blood on the air.

'You have been practising hard.'

Promus nodded.

'The battle against Magnus revealed many flaws in my technique,' he said. 'I shall not be found wanting again.'

'It was not our sword arms that were found wanting,' said Nagasena. 'It was our reliance on warriors of metal combined with a gross underestimation of the Crimson King. But do not be too hard on yourself, Dio. We faced a *primarch* and lived. I know of no others who can make such a claim.'

'There's truth in that,' agreed Promus, gesturing to a seat of mortal scale set beside the oversized desk. 'Sit. Let us talk.'

Nagasena pulled the chair out and reversed it before carefully sitting. He winced as the mass of bruising along his side flared in protest.

'Has something changed?' he asked, resting his elbows on the back of the chair. 'Has Lemuel said anything?'

'That *thing* in the brig is not Lemuel Gaumon,' said Promus.

'I know that, Dio,' said Nagasena.

'I think we should destroy it,' said Promus. 'We should not have brought it aboard the *Arethusa*. It is too dangerous.'

'Menkaura says the runic markings he cut upon Lemuel's chest will keep Magnus' spirit caged indefinitely.'

'And we are to accept the word of a traitor?' asked Promus. 'Even if we believe Menkaura's wish to stop his brothers from restoring Magnus, he cannot be trusted.'

'Of course he cannot, but Bjarki has examined the runes and tells me they are stronger than any he could cast. You have examined them too, so tell me – is Bjarki wrong in his assessment?'

'No,' admitted Promus with a weary sigh. 'I do not fully understand what the sorcerer did, but the invocations of binding are at least as powerful as the wards woven into the rock of the Temple of Correction.'

'Then we have time,' said Nagasena.

'Time for what?'

'To interrogate Magnus, to learn where the Thousand Sons will go next in search of his soul-shards.'

Promus paced the calisthenics mat, wringing his hands together. Nagasena saw how difficult this was for him. To have sacrificed the cobalt-blue of Ultramar must have been nearly impossible, but how many more steps had he taken from the ideals that once acted as his north star?

Would this be one step too many?

'We will learn nothing from it,' said Promus. 'All it does is rage against its chains and scream threats.'

'Then we must *make* it tell us what we need to know.'

'How? It will not willingly reveal anything to us, and the power within Gaumon's body has rendered it immune to Magos Uexküll's most powerful truth-seeking chem-trawls.'

'Lady Veleda,' said Nagasena. 'Her cards will read Magnus as they read Lemuel Gaumon.'

Promus stopped his pacing and turned to look directly at Nagasena, denial writ large across his features.

'Cartomancy?'

'It brought us to Aghoru. I believe it will take us where we need to go next.'

Promus sighed once more. 'What have we come to when we must use such black deceits to find our way?'

'We have no choice, Dio.'

'From what I understand, using such cards means touching the mind within Gaumon's body. Is Lady Veleda willing to risk that? It will be a terrible burden to bear alone.'

'She is,' said Nagasena. 'And she will not be alone. The Prosperine woman, Chaiya, will be with her.'

'What help will she be?'

'Magnus is a primarch of towering intellect, but this is not Magnus. Not entirely. It is his anger and bitterness, unshackled from his restraint. If we can provoke the primarch's self-righteousness with the guilt of what Gaumon did on Kamiti Sona, then we may goad him into careless words.'

'Throne, the risks involved…'

Nagasena brushed a strand of loose hair from his face. 'It is a risk, yes, but, I believe, a controlled one. Jambik Sosruko stands at Lady Veleda's side always, and Svafnir Rackwulf will have his harpoon poised the whole time.'

'And what of Sister Caesaria?'

Nagasena shook his head. 'She will be standing ready to intervene if necessary, but her presence would only drive Magnus' spirit deeper into Gaumon's flesh. It will retreat and we will learn nothing.'

Promus rubbed the heels of his palms across his face, and Nagasena saw again how exhausted he was. He was not fool enough to believe that a legionary could

not tire, could not know exhaustion, but to see it so starkly was still a shock.

‘Very well, when do we begin?’ asked Promus.

‘Immediately,’ said Nagasena. ‘The Thousand Sons are already on the hunt, and every advantage lies with them, for they know their gene-sire better than we ever will.’

Promus sat on the edge of his cot-bed and leaned forwards, resting his elbows on his knees. A moment of silence stretched, but far from being awkward, it reminded Nagasena of a time when the rancour that had set them on separate paths still lay in their future.

‘Why did you summon me, Dio?’ asked Nagasena.

Promus nodded, as if remembering something he had almost forgotten. Or as if he had something to say, but did not know whether he ought to speak.

‘Dio?’

‘I have something for you,’ said Promus, standing and making his way to one of the workbenches. He lifted something from beneath the cloth cover and turned back to Nagasena.

The breath caught in Nagasena’s throat.

‘What did you do…?’ he said, pushing himself upright.

Promus held out a magnificent scabbard of gleaming black lacquer, with golden wire and serpentine dragons entwined down its length.

‘You left this on Kamiti Sona,’ said Promus. ‘I retrieved it and I remade it.’

‘You should not have done that, Dio,’ said Nagasena. ‘*Shoujiki* was broken. The promise it carried and the meaning it held for me died when the *Phoenician’s warrior snapped it*. I do not know what you have made, but it is not my sword.’

‘I know that, Yasu,’ said Promus. ‘I know what the blade meant to you. I know–’

‘No, you do not,’ snapped Nagasena.

‘Maybe not, but Bödvar Bjarki told me what he said to you. “Do not mistake the blade for the man. One can break, but the other will endure.”’

Promus proffered the blade once more and said, ‘This is not *Shoujiki,* and it never can be, I know that. The words of rust and rest were spoken, but this is its metal reforged with a new soul and a new legend yet to build. Take it and wield it in the Emperor’s name.’

Nagasena did not want to touch the weapon, but felt his hand rising almost of its own accord. The sword’s hilt was wrapped in soft white leather, the hilt a simple boss of emerald. He took hold of the scabbard in his left hand as his fingers slipped around its familiar grip.

A soft sigh escaped his lips as he drew the weapon a handspan from the scabbard. The blade gleamed like silver and he saw fine script worked down its length from the blade collar in a language he did not know.

‘What does it say?’ he asked.

Promus shook his head. ‘Learn the language of Macragge and you will know.’

‘I will,’ said Nagasena, drawing the sword from its sheath. He held it straight out before him. The blade was magnificent, the metal polished smooth and with the distinctive curvature of eastern weapons.

Tears spilled down his cheeks, as though he were a new father being handed his firstborn.

‘I never thought to hold anything so beautiful again,’ said Nagasena, twisting the blade in a series of experimental slices. ‘You have my undying gratitude, Dio. This is exquisite.’

‘You were not you without an artist’s blade.’

‘Does it have a name?’

‘It is called *Aoshun,*’ said Promus. ‘The Dragon Sword.’

Set at the heart of Amon’s workshop was a flat oval boulder of milky crystal. A fist-sized chunk of spinel at its core gave it the semblance of a giant eye, and though this was but a replica of the stone that had been lost on Prospero, its presence gave Amon comfort.

He knelt before the icon, his palms flat against the rock, letting its power flow through him, even as he let it drink from him. The crystalline lattice was warm to the touch and threaded with light, pulsing like the rapidly firing synapses of a brain with the tides of the Great Ocean.

When Amon and the Crimson King returned from the Orrery, the remaining warriors of the Legion had converged upon his floating pyramid to pledge their loyalty to the primarch anew. And when Magnus emerged onto the balcony, the roar of acclaim reminded Amon of the Triumph at Ullanor, when he had stood with gods as millions of soldiers, Titans and war machines rolled past the grand dais.

All over the world, the Thousand Sons bent their efforts to their primarch’s magnificent endeavour. Amon too added power, his mind soaring in the ninth enumeration. This far from mortal concerns and divorced from the realm of the physical, Amon’s mind conjured ghosts from the past.

They drifted through his workshop like old friends come to pay him an unexpected, yet wholly welcome visit. He saw a parade of his dead brothers – warriors slain on Prospero, consumed by the flesh change, or fallen in service to the Emperor’s grand dream. The ghosts of his fellow scholars paused to examine the ephemeris on his walls, the thaumaturgical charts or the follies upon which he had passed hours of precise labour.

He smiled as he saw the weathered features of Ankhu Anen, the Guardian of the Great Library. The venerable scholar was just as Amon remembered him,

pallid of flesh and piercing in mien. His appearance appeared to prove false the myth of legionary immortality.

'You looked old even as a neophyte,' said Amon.

'*I* was *old,*' replied Ankhu Anen. '*They almost rejected me. Once they turned boys away from war for being too young, but for us they needed our youth.*'

'I cannot ever think of you as a youth.'

'*In truth, neither can I.*' Ankhu Anen paused by the great icon, reaching down to lay a palm flat upon it. A wistful smile played at the corners of the old man's mouth. '*It is like a dream of another life.*'

'A better one?'

'*A simpler one. The galaxy was different then.*'

'We are all different now.'

'*True, but some things will always be the same.*' He ran his ink-stained fingers along an empty shelf and raised an eyebrow. '*When the Wolves came to Prospero, I tried something similar. But what you are attempting here is beyond anything I sought to achieve.*'

The old man chuckled.

'*I tried to* physically *save everything, but* this… *This is much better. Tell me, Amon, do you really think it will succeed?*'

'It will,' said Amon.

Ankhu Anen shrugged, as if the matter were of no import, continuing to circle the workshop.

'The great work is already under way,' said Amon. 'Look upon the marble halls of the Gallery of Pergamum – its endless shelves are all but bare.'

'*Once, such a thing would have horrified me,*' Ankhu Anen sighed. '*Now it gives me hope. It means the colossal undertaking of sending many lifetimes of accumulated learning across time and space to the Orrery is actually* working.'

Pride filled Amon, even as he knew the voice of the murdered scholar came from within, a fictive companion drawn from his memories by the meta-configurations of the ninth enumeration.

'I have not felt hope in so long I had begun to think I might never know it again. The galaxy is in turmoil, all certainties erased in favour of this new war, this new dissociative system.'

'*One day soon, this war will be over,*' said Ankhu Anen. '*It will pass and be forgotten as all wars are in time. Then and only then will what you have saved here truly mean something.*'

'Yes,' said Amon, knowing this dream was just that, a dream, but unable to keep himself from articulating its golden future. 'And no matter who emerges triumphant from the Warmaster's rebellion, there will be knowledge enough to rebuild and the wisdom enough to use it. No matter what mistakes or

misunderstandings have been made in the past, the future can be rebuilt and the prize of Unity grasped once more.'

'*You are naive if you believe that,*' said Ankhu Anen, and a sliver of doubt entered Amon's thoughts, a droplet of poison in the water of a well. '*The Thousand Sons are damned in the eyes of the future. Nothing now can prevent that, but the legacies of betrayal that history will remember are irrelevant next to the legacy you leave for those with the wit and intelligence to find it. Remember that when he makes his choice!*'

Amon gasped and drew his hands back from the stone as if burned. The vision of Ankhu Anen and his fellow scholars vanished, leaving him alone in his echoing workshop.

No, not alone. He sensed a presence.

He rose and turned on his heel, seeing the unmistakable armoured silhouette of his gene-sire standing on the workshop's balcony. Swathed in a furred robe of deep maroon, Magnus stood with his head bowed, his shoulders slumped and his aura simmering with confusion. Amon was immediately on edge and descended to the third enumeration. Dreams of friends unforgotten faded like morning mist.

He stepped out onto the balcony and stood next to his father. Even burdened by their great work, Magnus still towered over him, though his bearing was not what it had been when they sat overlooking the world ocean of the Orrery.

The primarch swept his gaze around their chaotic domain, his mind roaming further than any eye could see. Magnus glanced down at him, and Amon felt the fractional pause as his father struggled to drag his name into the light.

'Amon, yes,' said Magnus with a nod. 'Who were you talking to in there?'

'No one, really. Just memories.'

'Memories of whom?'

'Ankhu Anen.'

Magnus' aura softened. 'Where did he go? I should like to see the cantankerous old rogue.'

Amon hesitated before answering. The same fog he'd seen in his father's aura right before he had vanished in the Great Ocean was creeping back in.

'Ankhu Anen is dead, my lord,' said Amon. 'He was never here. It was just a ghost of the past.'

'Dead?'

'On Prospero.'

Magnus nodded and slowly exhaled.

'Yes, of course, you're right. He died. I remember. On Prospero. I feel like I am living in a terrible nightmare from which I cannot wake. That really happened?'

'It did, my lord.'

Magnus put his head in his hands and said, ‘It is all fading, Amon. All that I am is crumbling around me. Soon there will be nothing left. Why did you bring me back here? *Why?*’

Magnus rounded on him, and Amon struggled to hide his grief at the anger and confusion he saw in his father’s face. Amon reached out and laid a hand on Magnus’ arm, letting a measure of his strength flow outwards.

‘My lord, I–’

‘Don’t touch me,’ snapped Magnus, and Amon felt the build up of killing power in his father’s fists. ‘I don’t know you.’

Amon stepped back, his hands out to the side, keeping his voice calm and even.

‘I am Amon. Your equerry.’

‘No, I would know Amon,’ said Magnus. ‘Who are you?’

‘I am Amon. Your friend. Remember?’

Magnus let out a shuddering breath and the lingering fog in his aura cleared a little. He nodded slowly.

‘Amon, yes. I remember now.’

Magnus turned back to the chaotic vistas beyond Amon’s tower, gripping the bronze railings tight enough to buckle the metal. Aether storms raged along the horizon, and sickly colours crackled on the mountains as if the world beyond were afire.

‘I know I should recognise this place,’ said Magnus, ‘but I see nothing I remember. Tell me its name.’

‘The only one that seems true is the Planet of the Sorcerers.’

A single tear ran down Magnus’ face.

‘That name means nothing to me,’ he said sadly. ‘None of them do any more.’

Only one place on the *Osiris Panthea* offered Ahriman any solace from the numbing hollowness he felt on the vessel. He climbed towards the upper levels of the Black Ship, his gleaming ivory heqa staff tapping a regular beat on the iron deck-plates.

The ship’s phantom-haunted transitways and vaulted assay chambers echoed with pleading whispers. Sourceless voices chattered in the shadows like grains of dust in the eye that could never be dislodged. They followed the power bound to Ahriman’s staff, hating it, yet drawn like moths to a flame.

The ship despised him and his kind.

‘As soon as we are done, I will hurl this vessel into the heart of a sun,’ he promised the darkness as it slithered across the bare iron walls. It was bad luck to curse a ship that bore you through the immaterium, but a sibilant wave of approval was his answer.

He had passed temporary command to Ignis, who stood by the captain’s lectern upon which was chained the *Book of Magnus*. Ahriman hated to be parted from

his primarch's great grimoire, but too long in its presence summoned the soul-shard of their father to the surface, together with all the concomitant repercussions.

The Crimson King had set the ship's course through Ahriman, but none aboard had the slightest idea of its eventual destination or how long the journey might take. Sanakht and Ignis accepted this without question, but Hathor Maat endlessly begged to consult the *Book of Magnus,* as if he might find some clue Ahriman had missed. Tolbek simply sat alone in his makeshift arming chamber, cleaning his weapons and applying endless coats of lapping powder to his war-plate.

Since their departure from the Seven Sleepers, Aforgomon had taken to wandering the lightless passageways of the ship alone, an arrangement that suited Ahriman well.

The less he saw of the ever-blackening yokai the better.

Groans and creaks transferred inwards from the hull through the vessel's colossal superstructure as the tides of the Great Ocean bore it towards an uncertain future.

Ahriman turned into a wide passageway lined with hooded statues, above which were mounted kite shields bearing the heraldic crests of the magisterial Navigator Houses of Terra. Each statue was dusty, every shield shawled in black cloth as though in mourning.

He followed the passageway to the end, crossing the molten remains of numerous warding runes arranged in apotropaic arcs. The doors they had sealed opened before him with a wave of his staff. Once, such rune-graven barriers would have denied entry to all but the most powerful neverborn creatures.

Now all they did was slow Ahriman's arrival.

The final door opened and he ascended the revealed staircase. At the top was another warded door, this one marked with chalk lines and hung with fluttering strips of faded oath paper. Trinkets and talismans, gifts offered to the chamber's occupant to see them safely through the empyrean to their destination. Strange to think of such superstitions aboard a vessel like this.

The door slid open and the shimmering, boiling, undersea glow of the immaterium spilled out a tide of variegated colours. The shadows fled the frothing streams of illumination, but Ahriman was renewed in its light.

When the *Osiris Panthea* still served the Imperium, this had been its Ocularis Chamber, where its Navigator guided the ship through the inconstant tides of the Great Ocean.

Ahriman paused at the threshold, as he saw the chamber was already occupied.

'What are you doing here?' asked Ahriman.

'Waiting for you,' said Aforgomon, reclining on the couch where the ship's Navigator would lie back and stare deep into the warp. The yokai swung its legs

from the couch, and Ahriman's skin crawled at the sight of how badly its once flawless body had been corrupted by the thing inside it.

The markings of invocatus were all but obscured, and crazed patterns of rust and corrosion wormed their way out from within. Its head tilted at an angle, an exposed hydraulic mechanism hanging from its rusted gorget like a tumour.

'I guard my solitary time as a grox-mare guards its young,' said Ahriman. 'Leave now.'

Aforgomon wagged a finger at Ahriman, and he saw it was one of only three that remained on its hand.

'Come now, Ahzek. We have matters to discuss, you and I.'

'We do not,' said Ahriman. 'Go.'

'I will leave soon enough,' said Aforgomon, rising from the Navigator's couch to stand before Ahriman. ***'But not before I remind you of the pact we swore in blood at the heart of the Torquetum. You owe a debt to me. Or have you forgotten I saved you all from the Voydes of Drekhye?'***

'I have not forgotten,' said Ahriman.

'Just as well,' said Aforgomon, peeling a strip of paint from the upper surfaces of its chest. Flakes of gold and silver fluttered to the floor. ***'It never goes well for mortals who fail to live up to their end of a bargain with my kind.'***

Ahriman laughed and held up his heqa staff before the daemon. It flinched from the gleam of light at its heart.

'You dare threaten *me?* You know the power I have now?'

Ahriman leaned forwards, smelling the sweet stench of corruption wafting from the corroded mechanisms within the yokai's body.

'You disgust me,' said Ahriman, circling Aforgomon. 'Almost nothing remains of the machine to which you are bound. A strong breath and you will be no more than dust in the wind.'

'You of all people should know that the decrepitude of this host body is no reflection of my power.'

Ahriman shrugged. 'As above, so below. You cannot hide your weakness from me, daemon. My eyes are clearer than ever before. You hold on to this reality by the tips of your claws. One misstep and you will be dragged howling into oblivion with the rest of your kind for a thousand years or more.'

'Then give me what you promised!' roared Aforgomon. ***'A soul is owed and a soul I will have!'***

Ahriman paused in his circling, and now the door to the chamber was behind Aforgomon. He shook his head.

'What you asked for is meaningless,' said Ahriman. 'What was it you demanded? "The prince with eyes of dust, a heart of ice, a soul of mirrors and the

face of a god." Even if I chose to honour a bargain made *in extremis,* I would not know how to give you what you want.'

'Choose your next actions wisely,' warned Aforgomon. ***'You made a pact with the neverborn.'***

'A pact I now renounce.'

Ahriman jabbed the tip of his heqa staff into Aforgomon's torso and pushed. The daemon howled and stumbled away from its touch, blackened hands clasped over a fresh burn in its buckled chestplate.

'Be gone,' Ahriman commanded.

The embarkation deck chosen for the interrogation was one of the *Arethusa'*s smallest, able to berth an Arvus lighter and little else. The chamber had been stripped bare, emptied of everything save a rune-inscribed gibbet at the centre of a circle of powerful wards. Svafnir Rackwulf had cut them into the deck with his null-spear under Sister Caesaria's precise direction.

Four remotely activated Tarantula turrets were positioned at the chamber's corners, undergoing a last round of testing by teams of weapon-servitors. A mix of heavy bolters and multi-meltas, all four were aimed squarely at the gibbet.

Bjarki, Nagasena and Promus watched the preparations from the mezzanine-level command station, an enclosed promontory of steel and armoured glass, filled with logic engines and berthing machinery. Magos Uexküll's deck crews had checked every aspect of the controls to ensure each system was in working order. The contents of the deck could be vented into space at a moment's notice, and all three warriors had been fully instructed in the correct usage of the controls.

'I do not like this,' said Promus, his arms folded across his chest.

'None of us do, Dio,' replied Nagasena. 'But what choice do we have? We need to know where the soul-shards of Magnus are to be found. And we need to know now.'

Bjarki paced the cramped control room, his fangs bared and cracking his neck as if preparing for a fight.

'How can we trust anything it says?' asked the Wolf. 'It is a thing of the Underverse. Lies are its sustenance.'

'You are correct, we cannot trust anything it tells us,' agreed Nagasena. 'We will learn what we need because it believes it is cleverer than us. Because it thinks we are beneath its notice.'

Bjarki grunted and jabbed a thumb at the final preparations going on below. 'I think it might be right.'

Promus ignored Bjarki's jibe and said, 'Elaborate, Yasu.'

Nagasena took hold of *Aoshun'*s leather-wrapped grip and said, 'The thing inside Gaumon is a part of Magnus the Red. It cannot help but believe it is

superior to mere mortals. It will seek to toy with Lady Veleda and mock her stunted intellect. She will play to that belief and allow it to think it has her at the mercy of its towering intellect. She will let it berate and condescend until it cannot help but reveal a hidden truth to better display its superiority.'

'You think it won't see what she attempts?' said Bjarki.

'Were this Magnus in his entirety, I would not countenance such obvious subterfuge,' said Nagasena, 'but this is a fragment of the primarch, a supremely dangerous one, yes, but one ruled by passion and the need to dominate. By using Chaiya as bait for that need, we will turn its power against it.'

Promus rubbed a hand across his face and let out a long sigh before saying, 'It is a grave risk we take here.'

'If anything starts to look like it is going wrong, this can be ended in a heartbeat,' said Nagasena, moving to the controls for the integrity field. 'The deck can be vented into the void with one pull of a lever. The *Arethusa* is presenting its flank to the gas giant below. Anything blasted from the ship will be vaporised in seconds.'

Promus took a last look through the armourglass to the deck below as the weapon teams moved out, leaving the Tarantula weapons primed and ready.

'Dio?' asked Nagasena, when the moment stretched. 'The *Arethusa* is your ship. The word is yours to give or deny. Do we proceed?'

Promus stood unmoving, and Nagasena could imagine him running through a hundred potential scenarios at once. The Ultramarines had a name for this process.

Practical. *Theoretical.*

What Nagasena was suggesting was dangerous, but would the theoretical gain outweigh the very practical risk?

'Do it,' said Promus.

TWENTY

Daemonhost
Ashes to ashes
Dark prince

‘I’m going to kill you all. You know that, yes?’

The thing bound in the upright metal cage spoke with Lemuel’s voice, but Chaiya knew it wasn’t him. It sounded like someone copying his voice after hearing a distorted vox-capture.

Its voice was a poor copy, but it was the eyes that revealed the greatest difference. Until they had soured in Kamiti Sona, Lemuel’s eyes had always been a honeyed brown, kind and filled with welcome.

Now they were cruel and soulless, devoid of humanity.

Lady Veleda had explained what had happened to Lemuel, but the idea that a portion of the primarch she had once loved now resided within him was too much to take. It was Lemuel’s flesh, mahogany-brown skin layered over muscle and bone, but the will animating it was utterly inhuman.

The locked gibbet held it rigid and unmoving, like a soldier standing to attention, but Chaiya felt the tension vibrating just below the surface. Lemuel shimmered as though a heart of molten light burned at his core. Writhing veins strained against his skin as if under tremendous pressure from within.

‘But I’m going to start with you,’ said Lemuel, his black eyes fixed on Lady Veleda as she arranged herself on a mat placed by JambikSosruko. ‘I’ll pull your spine out by the root and use that deformed skull of yours as a mace.’

The diminutive woman chuckled, a throaty rasp of amusement, and indicated the hulking shapes behind them.

‘I think Jambik Sosruko have something to say about that,’ she said. ‘He do good job of ripping your head off neck.’

Chaiya turned and looked up into the broad, flattened features of Lady Veleda’s constant protector. The huge migou wore armour formed of banded torques and a heavy carapace of moulded bronze shawled with a cloak of reeking fur. The creature could be a cousin to the two legionaries flanking it – one a flame-haired warrior armed with a long-hafted spear with a serrated blade, the other a chimeric giant of metal, meat and war-plate.

Like Chaiya and Lady Veleda, the three warriors wore humming Mechanicum signum-seals that would mark them as friendlies to the sentry guns stationed

around the deck.

‘That aberrant freak of genetics? *Please.*’

‘If not him, then Helblind and Rackwulf finish job,’ said Lady Veleda, lifting a rolled-leaf cheroot and a single match from a small table the migou placed next to her with a delicacy of touch that belied his brutish scale. A deck of cards sat at the edge of the table, next to what looked like a muslin-draped tea set of cups, pots and a ceramic jar.

Lady Veleda scratched the match to life with her thumbnail and lit the end of her cheroot. She inhaled deeply and blew a cloud of blue smoke towards Lemuel. Chaiya coughed at the foul reek of toxins, but at least it masked the stale-oil stink of their protectors.

‘Russ’ dogs couldn’t finish the job on Prospero – what makes you think they can do it here?’

Chaiya flinched at the naming of her razed home world, the loss an open wound in her heart that would never heal. She squeezed her eyes closed, bunching her hands into fists. Lady Veleda had warned her not to show any emotion before the thing wearing Lemuel’s flesh. It would scent any weakness like a psychneuein drawn to an unguarded mind.

Lady Veleda took another hit from her cheroot.

‘Because they do it right now, if I ask. They want to kill you. Very much they do. Lost many brothers on Prospero. Killing you make them very happy, I think.’ She turned. ‘You be happy to kill Magnus?’

‘Happy as a hunter knee-deep in *jorgunaur* blood,’ said Helblind, scraping his frosted axe along the side edge of his crux-shield.

‘And you, Svafnir Rackwulf?’

The giant warrior rapped the haft of his barbed spear on the deck and nodded.

‘Very happy,’ he said. ‘Give the word and my spear will cleave his heart.’

Lady Veleda grinned and said, ‘You see? You live or you die on word I give. Or not. Your choice.’

‘So why haven’t you given that word?’ said Lemuel with a grin that stretched so wide it split the skin at the corners of his mouth. Runnels of blood dripped down his chin. ‘If everyone aboard this ship wants me dead, yet I still draw breath, I have to imagine I have something you want, yes? Now what might that be?’

‘You know what I want,’ said Lady Veleda.

‘You want to know where the other shards of my soul are?’

‘Yes. You want to tell me?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘If you were chained in the deepest gaol and only recently gained your freedom, would you let someone put you back?’

‘You were chained?’ asked Lady Veleda.

‘Of course! Who recounts tales of Magnus the warrior?’ snarled Lemuel. ‘Who remembers the great duels he fought, the mighty foes he slew? Who speaks of him in the same breath as Angron or the Lion when they tell of the martial prowess of the primarchs?’

‘No one,’ said Lady Veleda.

‘So why would I tell you *anything?*’

‘It not us looking to put your soul back together.’

‘No, you just want to destroy it.’

‘You rather be nothing than put back in chains, I think.’

Lemuel did not answer and Lady Veleda sighed.

‘Suit yourself,’ she said, lifting the cards from the table and spreading them, face down, before her. ‘We do this hard way.’

‘Cartomancy?’ chuckled Lemuel, glaring with contempt at the worn deck. ‘What have you come to when you must use such black deceits to find your way?’

‘My cards not ordinary cards,’ said Lady Veleda, turning them over at random. ‘They hear all. Know all. Don’t believe me? Speak and I tell what truths they hear.’

Chaiya saw each of the revealed cards had turned edges and were faded with strange designs – cups, wands and other, more esoteric, symbols. She saw toppling stone towers, great warriors and all manner of unfamiliar beasts.

‘That deck will tell you nothing,’ said Lemuel. ‘Ahriman had a deck just like that, for all the good it did him. Etteilla was a fraud and your cards are copies of a fake.’

Lady Veleda blew out a series of perfect smoke rings.

‘Think you so? Cards led us to *you* on mountain.’

‘Because I let them,’ said Lemuel. ‘You think I *wanted* to remain trapped upon a ruined gateway to *Edinnu?*’

‘Maybe. Maybe not. But cards listened to body you stuck in. And here we are. Who knows what they hear now, eh?’

Chaiya listened to Lady Veleda and Lemuel speak as if they were merchants haggling over the price of fish. She sensed a battle being played out behind their every utterance, but had not the clarity of thought to understand it.

Lady Veleda turned her cards and placed those she didn’t want back in the deck. She turned over a card showing a lightning-struck tower with a skeletal reaper falling from its battlements.

‘Too obvious,’ she said and replaced it in the deck.

Chaiya kept her gaze fixed on Lady Veleda as she worked her way through the cards.

‘Look at me, Chaiya,’ said Lemuel.

Her gut knotted in terror and she felt her heart pounding within her chest. She shook her head.

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know you,’ she said.

‘Of course you do. Look at me.’

‘You can look, Prospero’s daughter,’ said Lady Veleda, resting a tiny hand on Chaiya’s forearm as she dealt another card. ‘Magnus-thing not harm you. Caesaria say Rackwulf’s runes strong.’

‘I don’t want to look,’ said Chaiya, biting her bottom lip in terror. ‘After what Lem did, I can’t look at him. I just can’t. I’m sorry.’

‘Come now, girl,’ said the thing wearing Lemuel’s face, sounding almost disappointed. ‘You’d be dead or worse if not for Lemuel. The cannibal corpse things of Kamiti Sona would have gnawed your eyes out and licked the inside of your skull clean if he hadn’t nudged that mother into doing what she’d secretly always wanted to do. The monsters would have flayed you alive and worn your skin as you watched Camille die. Are you telling me that’s what you’d rather have happened?’

Reluctantly, Chaiya raised her head and swallowed hard.

‘No,’ she said softly, finally meeting Lemuel’s gaze.

‘No,’ agreed the black-eyed monster. ‘He saved that boy years of misery and pain. Saved his mother the burden of caring for the mewling little wretch after he ruined her life by being born. Poor little Chaiya. You get to live and all it cost was the life of a worthless brat she hated anyway. Sounds like you got a good deal, girl.’

‘I didn’t hate that boy.’

‘Don’t lie,’ said Lemuel with a gurgling chuckle that made her want to vomit. ‘Go on telling yourself you didn’t, but I know everything Lemuel knows, all the things you told him when Camille wasn’t around. You hated that child for crying every night, for spoiling the little fantasies of better lives and better places you clung to. You hated him for reminding you every moment of every day that you were trapped in a nightmare of your own making.’

‘No. I didn’t,’ said Chaiya, tears flowing down her cheeks.

‘Liar!’

‘Yes!’ screamed Chaiya. ‘Yes, I hated him, but I didn’t want him dead!’

Lemuel laughed and said, ‘I *know* you did. Lemuel felt the relief filling you when the monsters went away. He felt it the moment you knew the boy was dead.

And he felt how relieved you were that it wasn't you. There's no shame in that. It's the survival instinct, bred into mortals even before you were knuckle-dragging primates. And anyway, haven't we all wanted to kill someone at some point?'

'No. Never.'

'But you want to kill me, yes?'

Chaiya sat silently.

'Yes,' she finally whispered.

'What did you say?'

'I said yes! I wish you were dead for what you did. I wish you had died when the Wolves first took us. I wish it had been you instead of that boy. I wish you were dead, you bastard!'

Lemuel's laughter echoed from the walls of the deck as Chaiya launched herself from her stool towards Lemuel. She had barely taken her first step when a meaty hand closed around her wrist like a vice. Jambik Sosruko held her fast and shook his head.

'Step. Back,' he said. 'Now.'

'Let me go, damn you!'

'Step. Back. Now.'

'Do as he say,' said Lady Veleda, without looking up from her cards. 'Be very bad to break circle Rackwulf carved. Be very bad indeed. Magnus wants you to break it. Maybe he can get out then. I not want that. You don't either, I think.'

Chaiya looked down and saw her left foot was a finger's breadth from crossing the outermost line of Rackwulf's runic carvings.

'Maybe you sit down, yes?' said Lady Veleda, tapping ash from her cheroot onto the deck. 'You not talk now, okay?'

Chaiya nodded and pulled back from the circle, lowering herself gingerly to her seat. 'You used your powers to force a mother to murder her child,' she said. 'What kind of person *does* that?'

'A person who wanted to live,' said Lemuel, trying and failing to shrug in his gibbet.

'You not talk, I said,' snapped Lady Veleda. 'Sit. Jambik Sosruko will pour us drink from Nagasena's special pot. It fresh brew I make to calm nerves. Maybe need some now?'

Yes,' said Chaiya, letting out a long, tension-filled breath and sinking down onto her stool as the migou lifted the muslin cloth from the tea set.

The painted ceramic pot and cups were exquisitely made, ringed with heroic tales rendered in thin lines of pale blue around their circumference. They were the most beautiful things she had ever seen.

Chaiya's eyes narrowed as the migou lifted something pale and ceramic that had been obscured by the cloth.

Something familiar, yet out of place.

'What's that doing here?' she said.

Nagasena saw it in the same instant. His eyes widened and his hand flew to the hilt of *Aoshun*.

'Yasu, what is it?' asked Promus.

'Get them out of there,' said Nagasena, turning towards the control room's exit. 'Right now.'

'What's wrong?' demanded Bjarki. 'What do you see?'

'Throne! How could I have missed it?' said Nagasena, running for the door.

'Missed what?'

Nagasena paused and half drew his sword.

'We don't have one soul-shard aboard the *Arethusa,*' he said. 'We have *two.*'

Jambik Sosruko lifted the pale urn that held the ashes of Kallista Eris from Lady Veleda's table. It looked absurdly small in his giant hands, but he held it as delicately as Lemuel had ever since Kallista's death. Chaiya hadn't noticed it on the table, arranged as it was among the other pots.

'Jambik?' said Lady Veleda. 'What you doing?'

The migou looked bewildered to be holding the urn, its heavy brow furrowed and its eyes screwed up in concentration. The synaptic crown buzzed with static.

His giant head cocked to one side and he nodded slowly.

Then he smashed the urn with a boulder-like fist.

Chaiya's hands flew to her mouth in shock.

A swirling cloud of glittering dust enveloped Jambik Sosruko. It sparkled like diamond dust in starlight, lingering in the air and coiling about him like a sentient fog.

The migou's back arched and it let out a cry of pain as the glittering dust poured itself into him, filling his body with light. Arcs of fire streamed into his eyes and mouth. His whole body seethed as the soul-shard hidden within the urn bonded with a living host.

'Maleficarum!' yelled Svafnir Rackwulf, leaping forwards with his spear extended. He rammed it into the migou's belly, but the weapon's haft bent as reinforced plate and slabbed muscles kept its tip from penetrating.

Sosruko backhanded the spear aside and pistoned his leg out to hurl Rackwulf across the deck. With a howling roar, Gierlothnir Helblind closed and battered his crux-shield against Jambik Sosruko's arm.

The limb went wide. The Wolf pressed inwards, going low.

His axe came around hard and fast.

It bit thigh meat, and the migou grunted in pain. Chaiya cried out in fear as Helblind wrenched his blade free in a welter of blood. Jambik Sosruko lashed out at his attacker, but Helblind was already moving.

He rolled around behind his foe.

Sosruko made a quarter turn to face him.

Chaiya scrambled away from the roaring combatants on her haunches, gagging on the bitter taste of blood. The urge to flee, to escape this violence, flooded her limbs with adrenaline.

Svafnir Rackwulf threw himself back into the fray, his spear held low like a plains hunter facing a leviathan. He yelled a Fenrisian oath before thrusting his weapon up into the fleshy gap at Sosruko's armpit. The barbed tip plunged into the migou's body. Rackwulf churned the blade like a lever, and Sosruko bellowed in agony.

'Stop foolishness now!' shouted Lady Veleda, tiny before the vast bulk of her son.

The migou paused at the sound of her voice.

Did a shred of its crushed psyche remember her?

Helblind took advantage of the creature's distraction and hammered his axe against the side of its knee. Chaiya heard the sickening sound of shattering bone. Still, the migou did not go down, its nervous system too blunt and rudimentary to acknowledge an injury that should have crippled it.

Rackwulf ripped his spear from Jambik Sosruko's body, tearing tendons, shredding muscle and bone as the angled barbs wreaked irreparable damage. Gierlothnir Helblind rapidly sidestepped around to the migou's rear, and Chaiya yelled a warning as he crossed the rune-carved circle.

'Stop, you'll–'

Her words were drowned out as Lemuel bellowed from his gibbet cage and Chaiya's Prosperine senses, even dulled as they were, felt a surge in aether energy.

'Kill the dwarf bitch,' roared Lemuel.

Jambik Sosruko turned and lumbered towards Lady Veleda.

Helblind and Rackwulf pressed the advantage, their weapons cutting deep into Sosruko's body as he gave up on defending himself. None of his many mortal wounds were slowing him.

'Told you stop!' said Lady Veleda, planting herself before Jambik Sosruko and holding a stern hand up before her. Chaiya saw she held a card in her other hand, but its face was turned from her.

The migou towered over her and Chaiya saw nothing in its eyes that spoke of any love for the woman before it. Jambik Sosruko snatched Lady Veleda from the ground as easily as a child might lift its favourite toy.

Rackwulf's spear tip exploded from the migou's belly.

A jet of blood sprayed, and where it landed inside the runic circle, it hissed as though the deck were a heated skillet.

'Put me down!' said Lady Veleda.

Sosruko howled as the Wolves hacked him to pieces.

He gave one last roar and swung Lady Veleda like a club. Her body smashed against Lemuel's gibbet cage, every bone shattering like glass.

'No!' screamed Chaiya.

Lady Veleda fell in a limp, broken heap at the foot of the buckled metal of the cage. Chaiya crawled towards her, knowing she could not help her, but unwilling not to at least try. Smoke rose from the woman's skin and her eyes were wide with shock and disbelief. Amazingly, she yet lived, holding out the bloodstained card towards Chaiya.

'Daughter of Prospero…' said Lady Veleda, imploring with the last of her strength. 'Look. Understand…'

She saw the image on the card, but had no knowledge of what it represented. She imprinted it on her mind's eye as it burst into flames and fell to ashes.

Rackwulf and Helblind stood over the fallen body of Jambik Sosruko. Chaiya closed her eyes and wept, pressing her hands over her ears to block out the wet thuds of blades in flesh.

She heard metal twist and snap, blaring klaxons. Emergency beacons spun up to bathe the embarkation deck in flashing amber light.

Chaiya cried out as a surging fire washed over her, a fire that burned colder than anything she had ever known. She let out a misted breath and looked up through tears of grief and pain to see the torn and bloodied metal of the gibbet cage hanging open.

She heard a roar of agony and rolled onto her side.

Chaiya opened her eyes, but what she saw made no sense.

Svafnir Rackwulf was down on his knees, his armour molten and cherry-red. He howled, the flesh on one half of his face bubbling and running like wax.

Lemuel was holding Gierlothnir Helblind aloft, bearing the giant Wolf's weight without effort, his right hand buried deep in the warrior's armoured chest. The cloud of light that had taken Jambik Sosruko now abandoned the migou's corpse, billowing upwards like golden fire and pouring into Lemuel. The former remembrancer's flesh bulged and rippled at the reunion of the two soul-shards.

He unleashed his new-found power into the warrior of Fenris, searing the Wolf to ash and fire within his war-plate. Gierlothnir Helblind loosed one last defiant howl before the aether-fire consumed him.

Lemuel dropped the blackened shell of Helblind's armour.

It came apart in a clatter of smoking debris, dust pouring from its joints and neck.

Lemuel turned towards her and the searing core of doomed suns burned in his eyes, so bright it seemed they merged into one singular orb.

'I told you I would kill you all,' said Lemuel.

Nagasena vaulted the railing and dropped to the deck in a crouch. He already knew he would be too late. The remembrancer towered over the Prosperine woman, his body seething with power. Lady Veleda and the two Wolves lay broken at his feet, and it seemed to Nagasena that two stuttering images flickered in the space occupied by one body.

Aoshun whispered fully from its sheath, the words of Ultramar glittering along its length. He heard Bjarki moving down the railings behind him, dropping with the grace of a hunting leopard.

Wailing sirens filled the deck with noise and Nagasena hoped Dio Promus wasn't about to vent the entire deck to the void. Nagasena had given him that option, but was betting he would hold off making such a hard call until the very last instant.

'Go left,' roared Bjarki, swiftly overtaking Nagasena.

He nodded as he ran and widened the gap between himself and the Rune Priest. Despite the enormous bulk of his armour, Bjarki was easily outpacing him.

The deck was not large, and Nagasena's pace slowed as the conjoined soul-shards of Magnus turned Lemuel's gaze upon them. The remembrancer's face was stretched wide in a rictus mask, the inhuman power filling him too much to bear.

Even Bjarki's step faltered as the power within Lemuel took notice of him. Nagasena turned as he heard the blast doors on his right opening. The newly transplanted machine soul of Magos Araxe stomped in, bearing a heavy adamantium pole topped with a serrated capture-collar fashioned from null-metals. Olgyr Widdowsyn ran in after him, followed by the limping figure of Sister Caesaria. The pariah Sister bore her many hurts stoically. She had refused all pain-balms for fear it would blunt her powers to quell the tides of the immaterium.

We barely captured Magnus before…

How can we hope to contain him now his power has doubled?

But there would be no more bloodshed here.

Lemuel carefully dropped to his knees and laced his hands behind his head.

'I will not fight you,' he said. 'I surrender.'

'Surrender?' roared Bjarki, spinning his frost blade around until its tip was aimed squarely at Lemuel's heart. 'You slay two of my men and you think you can *surrender?*'

‘I only killed one,’ said Lemuel, nodding to the groaning Svafnir Rackwulf. ‘That one is still alive, but he won’t be for long if you don’t get him to a medicae.’

‘Bödvar…?’ said Nagasena, seeing the urge to strike Lemuel down in Bjarki’s features. The savage heart of Fenris was to the fore, but the greater strength of nobility won out.

‘*…the one you feed!*’ said Bjarki through clenched teeth.

‘What?’ said Lemuel.

‘Do not talk to it,’ said Sister Caesaria.

Bjarki flinched at her words and Nagasena saw his top lip curl in distaste at her abrasive psy-dampening powers. The mere proximity of one of the null-Sisters was enough to curb the most powerful psykers.

But would it be enough to contain the power of a primarch?

Lemuel groaned and the diffuse light seeping from his skin dimmed as Magos Araxe moved behind him. The capture-collar snapped shut around Lemuel’s neck and he grimaced as the piston-limbs of the magos yanked him to his feet with enough force to draw blood.

Olgyr Widdowsyn skidded to a halt beside Svafnir Rackwulf and, together with his long spear, lifted him into his arms. The fallen Wolf’s features were in ruins, scorched and dripping from his bones in fatty runnels. Without a word spoken, Widdowsyn bore his wounded brother away.

‘We should kill this thing,’ said Caesaria.

‘I do not know if such a thing is even possible,’ said Nagasena.

‘I can try to find out,’ replied Bjarki.

‘Kill him,’ said Chaiya, weeping as she cradled the shattered form of Lady Veleda in her arms. ‘Kill him for all he’s done, for all he’s brought down upon us.’

‘Never thought I’d agree with a child of Prospero,’ said Bjarki.

‘No,’ said Nagasena, holding up a hand and sinking to one knee. He played out the last moments of the slaughter he’d witnessed from the control room, following the spread of ancient cards lying in a hooked pattern around the fallen seer. Nagasena felt as though he ought to be seeing some significance in the play of the cards and their relationships to one another, but he had no sensitivity for such things.

Despite that, he remembered exactly how they had fallen.

And how Lady Veleda had held one just before she died.

Nagasena looked up from the cards and said to Chaiya, ‘You saw something, didn’t you? What did Lady Veleda’s cards hear?’

Looking around the sepulchral bridge of the *Osiris Panthea,* Hathor Maat could clearly see the psychic toll the Black Ship was exacting on its new crew. None of

the Thousand Sons had rested since seizing the vessel from Kamiti Sona, and every one of them was paying a heavy price for that.

Their nightmares were too vivid and too anguished for any of them to risk sleep, and their waking moments were little better. The most powerful among them felt the Black Ship's grating suppression the most.

Ignis roamed the command deck like a madman picking at his scabs, repeating endless number sequences of arcane significance and scratching furiously on a broken dataslate. Tolbek sat with his head in his hands on a crew bench at the edge of the bridge, staring vacantly ahead. The Pyrae's ascendancy was waning, and the tempestuous adept's mind had turned inwards at the loss of his Fellowship's primacy.

Ahriman was likely up in the Ocularis Chamber, staring into the Great Ocean in search of guidance and blindly trusting that the shard of their gene-sire within his staff was guiding them true.

Sanakht, poor loyal Sanakht, sat alone beneath the lectern bearing the *Book of Magnus,* an obedient hound awaiting its master's voice. He obsessively polished and sharpened sword blades that could gleam no brighter nor hold a keener edge. Chained at the foot of the lectern, Camille Shivani trembled in the cold of the bridge, her breath misting as she knotted the thin fabric of her robes between her fingers.

Lucius of the Emperor's Children paced the deck, grinning as he whistled to himself. He tapped a martial beat on the pommel of his sword, and even Hathor Maat, who knew what the swordsman was doing, found it irritating. Circling in opposition to Lucius was Aforgomon, and the irony of its physical disintegration in opposition to his constant renewal was a source of great amusement to Hathor Maat.

Alone of the Thousand Sons, he remained unburdened by chronically phlegmatic humours and dark moods, though only he understood the reason why.

Tolbek likely had an inkling, but had said nothing.

Hathor Maat's moment of near discovery had come three days ago. He had emerged from another hold of captives after purging the burgeoning mutations simmering beneath his skin. He'd turned to see Tolbek standing in a weak pool of light a little farther along the corridor. Cold dread seized Hathor Maat's heart at what the adept of the Pyrae might say or do.

But Tolbek had simply barged past him, pausing only long enough to glance into the compartment and see the desiccated husks of withered bodies strewn within. Hathor Maat waited for a reaction, but Tolbek said nothing and continued on his way.

He had no idea what had brought Tolbek below the waterline and had no wish to remind him of their accidental meeting. A mystery, but not one which Hathor

Maat cared to unravel.

Hathor Maat ran a hand over his face, surprised to find he was sweating, even in the chill of the bridge. He risked looking up from his position at the surveyor controls to glance at the warrior of the Emperor's Children.

Lucius still sported the perfect likeness of the Phoenician's face – insult and adoration all in one. He raised a questioning eyebrow, and Hathor Maat gave an imperceptible nod in return. The swordsman's grin spread even wider, and his fingers laced around the wire-wrapped grip of his sword.

Lucius sauntered over to where Sanakht tended to his blades.

He reached down and gripped Sanakht's wrist.

'It doesn't matter how sharp you make them, you'll never be good enough to beat me,' said Lucius.

Sanakht's head snapped up, all lethargy and distraction gone in a heartbeat.

'What did you say?'

'I said that I'll beat you however sharp you make them.'

'Are you really doing this?' said Sanakht. 'Here? Now?'

Lucius shrugged. 'I'm bored.'

Sanakht stood, his legs uncoiling to move him from a seated position to standing without apparent effort. His swords, one of black, one of white, flashed to his sides, quivering with motion.

'Then find some other distraction,' warned Sanakht, turning away from Lucius.

'On *this* ship?' said Lucius, following Sanakht as he moved away. 'There are no other distractions apart from you.'

'We fought at my tower,' snapped Sanakht. 'Had the battle been to the death, we would both have perished. Is that what you want?'

'Maybe it is,' said Lucius. 'Maybe I want to see if there's anyone good enough to put me down. I'd hoped it would be you, but I think I was wrong.'

Sanakht's grip tightened on the hilts of his swords.

'Must you do this now?'

'Why not?' said Lucius, pressing in close to Sanakht, speaking barely an inch from his face. 'Do you think every battle will be fought at your convenience? Is that the only way you can be sure of winning, by having everything *just so?*'

'Why are you doing this? Really?'

'Because I *have* to kill you,' said Lucius. 'I can't bear to look at you knowing you might be better than me. I need to know. Either I kill you and know I'm better, or you slay me and I won't have to look at your simpering face a moment longer.'

'Meet me in the arming halls in thirty minutes and we will cut to the heart of the matter.'

‘Thirty minutes?’ said Lucius, shaking his head. ‘I’m afraid that won’t do. I need to know now.’

‘Then prepare for disappointment,’ said Sanakht.

‘That’s the one thing I never do,’ said Lucius.

Sanakht spun and crouched, crossing both swords over his head as Lucius’ blade swung down in an overhand cut. The clash of their blades was deafening in the close confines of the bridge.

Camille screamed and hugged the pillar of the lectern as the two blademasters fought in a flurry of lightning-swift blows. Sparks flew from their weapons as they surged back and forth across the deck. Hathor Maat watched the dazzling skill on display in awe, their blades moving too fast to follow.

The sudden burst of activity galvanised the Thousand Sons like a jolt of electricity to the heart. Tolbek leapt to his feet with a roar, sparks guttering at his fingertips where once roaring flames would have seethed.

Ignis paused in his recitations and focused all of his attention on the combat, assimilating a thousand new variables into his mystic calculations. Aforgomon moved to stand between Hathor Maat and the battling swordsmen.

Hathor Maat moved swiftly.

He crossed the deck in three strides and stood before the *Book of Magnus.* His gloved hand trembled as he lifted it towards his primarch’s book.

Could he really do this?

The enormity of what he was attempting struck him like a blow. This was the life’s work of Magnus the Red, the grimoire that contained his every secret, every parable of wisdom.

Could he really deface his father’s great work?

The skin beneath his glove rippled and the decision was made. With great effort, he lifted his mind into the fourth enumeration and placed his hand firmly on the open book. He gasped, as if he had just plunged it into a vat of liqnite.

The power contained within the book’s limitless pages surged through him. Hathor Maat saw a world ocean stretching out before him, a world of infinite memory and wisdom, a place where nothing was ever forgotten and everything could be known.

Hathor Maat angrily blinked away the far-distant world and forced his mind back to the present. It would not take long for the duel between Sanakht and Lucius to be ended, but he only needed a moment.

The words in the *Book of Magnus* had been inscribed by the remembrancer Mahavastu Kallimakus, a mortal scrivener whose hand had been wielded by the primarch to compile his great work. Hathor Maat felt the vanished man’s presence in every etched syllable, formula, incantation and cursive pen stroke.

The sounds of the fighting swordsmen faded as Hathor Maat poured his Pavoni powers into the book. He felt it resist, for words were stubborn and numbers irrational, but he exerted his will into the ink itself, the pigments of its tallows, its acids and gall.

The ink writhed under his touch, fighting him with all the power that had been poured into its creation. Hathor Maat pushed himself into the eighth enumeration, enacting thought forms more suited to combat. Every change he forced into the book restored itself moments later, but he widened his attack, utilising every arte of the Pavoni to effect change.

Powerful wards arose from the heart of the grimoire, deep-buried defences that now recognised the threat Hathor Maat represented. A terrible heat grew beneath Hathor Maat's hand, and his glove blew away in floating cinders. His eyes burned and he blinked away spots of light and a burning sensation building behind them as a crimson veil fell over his vision.

He glanced away, but all attention was on the swordsmen. He heard Lucius cry out. Had Sanakht actually landed a blow?

Beneath him, Camille Shivani looked up, watching what he did. Her face hardened and she gave him a slow nod of approval at his sabotage.

With the last of his powers, Hathor Maat threw a final surge of biomantic energy into the book's ink, his power detonating like a frag grenade in the midst of a lengthy treatise on the mechanics of immaterial transmutation.

He pulled his hand from the book, breathless and all but exhausted. The bones in his fingers curdled with motion, and sweat coated his skin like a layer of oil. The bloody hue still veiled his sight and he wiped his eyes. His hand came away smeared with grit and dust.

Hathor Maat looked down at the book. One by one the changes he had wrought on the page were being undone. Every letter, every number, every alchymical symbol he had changed within the *Book of Magnus* was reverting back to its original form.

All save one.

An insignificant portion, an addendum really. Formulae sequences scribbled in a margin as an afterthought.

A passage of no real relevance.

But Hathor Maat recalled something Amon used to say, and a slow smile spread across his lips. When hammering home the value of attention to detail, the primarch's equerry had been fond of using the construction of the Pyramid of Photep as a living allegory.

Small perturbations we miss or ignore, tiny flaws we regard as inconsequential… They have far-reaching consequences.

'As above, so below,' whispered Hathor Maat.

Even now, many hours after his death, blood still flowed from Jambik Sosruko's wounds, as if his mighty heart refused to accept the truth of his death. The migou's body was covered with a heavy tarpaulin, its form too large to fit in any of the mortuary's corpse compartments.

The space was brightly lit, all sterile steel, gleaming porcelain tiles and humming banks of chirurgical machinery. The wall behind Chaiya was lined with polished steel vaults for storing bodies, each one another life ended on the altar of this senseless war.

Chaiya placed a hand over the migou's breast, half expecting his wide chest to rise as breath filled his lungs. The mortal wounds inflicted by two Wolves were too thorough in the harm they had wreaked for even a warrior as mighty as Jambik Sosruko to survive.

'He didn't deserve this,' she said, her breath misting in the chill air of the mortuary.

'Few of us get what we truly deserve,' said Promus, standing across from her with his arms folded. The towering legionary's armour matched his surroundings, as though he were a harvester of souls for this place of the dead.

'Perhaps we should,' she said. 'For good or ill.'

Yasu Nagasena circled the dead body, reciting something in a singsong tongue she did not understand. He kept one hand on the grip of his sword, the other clasped over his heart.

'What are you doing, Yasu?' asked Promus.

'He gives the beast a warrior's sending,' said Bjarki, from the far end of the chamber. The Rune Priest pressed a heavy, gold-chased pistol into the neck of a kneeling legionary with a heavy spiked collar around his neck. Coiling tattoos on his fettered arms identified the captive as one of the Thousand Sons.

Menkaura. She'd been told his name was Menkaura.

'It all comes down to death, doesn't it?' she said. 'No matter how you dress up what you set out to achieve in the Great Crusade, you cannot change what you are.'

'What do you think we are?' asked Menkaura.

Bjarki jerked the chain taut, drawing a grunt of pain from Menkaura and blood from his neck.

'You don't talk unless I tell you to talk, remember?' said Bjarki. 'That was the rule, ja?'

Menkaura slowly nodded, careful to avoid pricking his neck on the collar. Chaiya answered him anyway.

'You are killers. Enders of lives. Destroyers.'

'We are all only what these dark times have made us, lady,' said Promus. 'The Warmaster's treachery has upset the natural order of the galaxy and none of us are

on the paths we chose to walk.'

Chaiya moved around the slab upon which Jambik Sosruko lay and stood defiantly before Promus. Anger darkened her skin and she felt her fingers curl into fists.

'And what has your war to do with me? Why was I pulled into your fight? What gave you the right to imprison me for years and separate me from the person I love most in the world?'

'This war affects us all,' said Promus. 'From the Emperor down to the least of His subjects.'

'Do you even know why the Warmaster rebels against the Emperor?' shouted Chaiya, slamming her fists against Promus' chest. 'Do you? What grievance does he have that necessitates dragging the entire galaxy down into such terrible bloodshed?'

She hammered her fists against his breastplate until they were bloody. Red handprints smeared the metal, and Chaiya sobbed as Promus let her vent her rage and grief upon him.

'I cannot answer you, lady,' said Promus. 'But before this is over, the Emperor will drag that answer from Horus' heart.'

Menkaura laughed, the sound mirthless and despairing.

'They can't answer you, lady,' he said. 'They can't answer you because they don't know.'

Bjarki cracked the butt of his pistol against the back of Menkaura's head. The legionary grunted, but bore the pain stoically. He turned his head and sneered at the Wolf.

'I told you not to talk!' roared Bjarki.

'No,' said Chaiya, turning from Promus and cradling her bruised hands. 'I want to hear what he has to say.'

Menkaura took a breath to clear his head. He looked up at her and she saw him recognise the shape and form of her bone structure. She folded her arms across her chest, lest he take her Prosperine origins as a sign of favour.

'Bödvar Bjarki can beat me all he wants, but it will not change anything. The Warmaster has aligned himself with the darkest powers of the warp, and a corruption worms its way deeper into his heart with every passing day. None of the Emperor's sons know why Horus Lupercal has turned, and none of them *want* to know.'

Chaiya stood before Menkaura and looked him straight in the eye. Once she had counted his Legion as the protectors of her home world, as warriors to be admired and lauded as much for their wisdom as their skill in warmaking.

'Why would they not want to know?' she asked.

‘Because they fear what they might learn,’ said Menkaura, turning his gaze on Promus. ‘Isn’t *that* what you are afraid of? What you are *really* afraid of?’

Chaiya flinched as Bjarki struck the captive warrior again. Blood and teeth flew from the impact. The Wolf jammed the barrel of the gun under Menkaura’s jaw, his finger a hair’s breadth from applying the pressure required to fire it.

‘Understand this, traitor, you live only because Promus has not seen what I have seen. He was not on Prospero to witness the maleficarum you and your primarch unleashed. He does not yet understand how dangerous you are.’

Menkaura licked a tongue across his bloodied lips.

‘You are right,’ said Menkaura, spitting a mouthful of blood to the tiled floor of the mortuary. ‘I *am* dangerous. More dangerous than you can imagine, and yet I am the least warlike of my brothers. So imagine how dangerous my entire Legion *could* have been, standing firm against Horus and shoulder to shoulder with yours.’

Chaiya saw the murderous anger drain from Bjarki. Not entirely, never that, but enough to remove the threat of Menkaura’s imminent death.

‘Would that it could have been so, but that was not the wyrd,’ said Bjarki. ‘The wyrd says we are to be enemies, so here you are with my gun in your face.’

‘I wonder, could it ever have been different?’ asked Menkaura.

‘Some things are not for us to know,’ said Bjarki.

‘*Everything* is for us to know,’ said Menkaura.

Yasu Nagasena stepped in close as Bjarki’s hackles rose. He placed a hand on the plates of his shoulder guard, looking absurdly small next to the Wolf.

‘I do not pretend to understand this wyrd of yours, Bjarki,’ he said, ‘but does not the fact that Menkaura is here, right now, speak to the fact that we need him?’

Bjarki shrugged. ‘Perhaps. He is here and we will make use of him. That is as much as I know, but wyrd is not that simple. Do not interpret it in a way that fits the facts you want it to fit.’

Nagasena gave Bjarki a tight bow before turning back to look at Chaiya. His eyes were a warm honey-gold and fixed her with a stare of such intensity that it made her take a backward step.

‘The card Lady Veleda held just before she died,’ he said. ‘You saw it, yes?’

‘I did,’ said Chaiya.

‘Clearly?’

‘Only for a second, but yes.’

‘Then describe it to him,’ said Nagasena, gesturing towards Menkaura.

Chaiya nodded and focused her mind, trying to piece together the varied parts of the card, knowing Lady Veleda’s legacy depended upon her. The image of the card floated in her mind, and she used the mental training she had learned on Prospero to sharpen its picture.

‘A divine figure bearing a fiery sword in his right hand and an eagle-topped globe in his left,’ said Chaiya. ‘Angels fly above the figure, blowing golden trumpets from which hang silk banners.’

Menkaura let out a sound that was half sigh and half sob.

‘Do you recognise this card?’ asked Nagasena, unable to conceal the edge of desperation in his voice.

Menkaura nodded, his face downcast. ‘Yes.’

‘What is it?’

‘It is the Judgement card,’ said Menkaura, and Chaiya saw Bjarki and Promus stiffen in response.

Nagasena saw it too. ‘What does it signify?’ he asked.

‘Ask Promus,’ said Menkaura. ‘He was there.’

‘Dio?’

Promus hesitated before answering.

‘Nikaea.’

TWENTY-ONE

Degeneration
Souls collide
Dark rebirth

Amon found his father bathed in blood.

A storm raged in a lacerated sky, but that was nothing new for the Planet of the Sorcerers in these troubled times. On a world of inconstancy, destructive storms of aether-fire were the only things that now never changed.

But this was no natural storm, if anything on this benighted world could be counted natural. It rained blood, and flames burned skywards at the heart of a crude city of fallen menhirs, nestled in the cheerless foothills of mountains carved from smoked glass.

Amon's Stormbird growled with hostility at the edge of the city, its engines powering down as he made his way through the primitive settlement. A pair of servitors followed him, guiding the golden support throne that had once aided the healing processes of his shattered spine.

Blood-matted corpses were strewn everywhere, bestial things of hoof and horn that might once have been men. Their bodies lay in shredded chunks, as though they had been fed into a giant threshing machine. Arcing loops of blood had painted the ancient stones, and Amon saw geometric significance in each intersecting line, every cursive spray. The rain was washing them away, and Amon trudged through sucking mud that bubbled red around his boots.

He followed a path of murder through the city, eventually arriving at a circle of hard-packed earth with a towering idol at its centre – a vaguely avian thing with curling, eye-tipped antlers and wings fashioned from beaten metal and driftwood.

Where had the beasts acquired driftwood?

Standing before the great idol and looking up through the rain in confusion was Magnus the Red. At this moment, the primarch's name was aptly earned, for he was drenched from head to foot in his victims' blood.

Hundreds of the slain beasts surrounded him, and his khopesh blade was slathered with gore. Magnus turned towards Amon, his expression hard to read beneath the red rain washing his skin. The primarch stared at him for long seconds, illusory breath heaving in lungs that did not truly exist.

Which Magnus stood before him?

His father lifted his khopesh and with a pulse of thought, the blood coating his weapon and flesh lifted in an aerosolised cloud. Resplendent once again, Magnus hooked his sword at his hip and strode towards him.

'Amon,' said Magnus, and he let out a relieved breath that his father at least recognised him today.

His relief was to be short-lived as Magnus continued, 'How is it that such profane creatures are allowed to exist on Morningstar?'

'This is not Morningstar, my lord,' said Amon.

Magnus' eye darkened. 'Why must you always argue with me, Amon?'

'You taught me that truth was the highest virtue.'

Thunder crashed over the mountains and shards of glass fell from the highest peaks. The Legion's adoptive home world was tearing itself apart in an echo of Prospero's death.

'Why are you lying?'

'I do not lie, my lord,' said Amon, fighting to keep the sorrow from his voice and shouting to be heard over the storm. 'This is not Morningstar, nor Shrike, nor Prospero! This world accepts no name other than the Planet of the Sorcerers.'

'You keep saying that, but it is not true,' snapped Magnus. 'These are the Mountains of Dust. This city was Zharrukin.'

This last name puzzled Amon, for – unlike the others – it was not one he knew. Something about it was familiar, but his normally infallible memory could not connect the name with any recollection he possessed.

'No, my lord,' said Amon, as his father advanced through the rain with purposeful strides. 'This city has no name. No one knows where it came from or how these beasts found their way here.'

'Stop lying!' roared Magnus, and Amon threw up a kine shield to deflect the primarch's anger. Stone cracked around him and glittering motes filled the air as the nearest menhirs split with the sound of thunder.

Magnus towered over him and said, 'Gather the Legion, Amon. My father needs us at His side.'

'I cannot,' said Amon, fully aware of the risks he ran in confronting his father's fracturing soul with painful truths. Three times already Magnus had almost killed him, but no other means to bring him back to himself had proved effective.

'Why not?' demanded Magnus.

'Because most of them are dead. The Wolves of Russ slew them when they burned Prospero.'

His kine shield splintered as Magnus picked him up bodily with one ruddy, clawed hand. Amon's father slammed him against the cracked menhir and such was the ferocity he saw in his eye it was as though Angron himself held him.

‘You dare insult my brother?’ roared Magnus. ‘Russ is a warrior of honour. He would never turn on us.’

‘He did, my lord. The Sixth Legion fell upon Prospero as our executioners,’ gasped Amon as Magnus’ grip on his throat tightened.

‘At least clothe your lies with a veneer of plausibility, Amon,’ said Magnus. ‘What reason could Leman Russ possibly have for setting his warriors loose upon us?’

Amon struggled to form an answer, but Magnus dropped him and turned away, his hands clutching his head.

‘No!’ cried Magnus, and Amon climbed to his feet, his armour clogged with blood-soaked mud. ‘I don’t believe you. I *cannot* believe you! To believe what you say is true is to accept the unacceptable.’

‘You have to come back to me, my lord,’ said Amon, daring to reach out and place a hand on his father’s shoulder. The immaterial flesh was hot to the touch, as though the effort of remembering the truth of the galaxy was burning Magnus from within.

‘I can feel their pain,’ said Magnus, sinking to his knees.

‘Whose pain, my lord?’

‘All of them. My brothers, my father… Is it too late for us? It was within our grasp. All it would have taken was one more step. All of us could have taken it together.’

‘Please, father,’ said Amon. ‘Come back to me. You are Magnus the Red and you are too strong to fade like this. The truth is painful, it is jagged edges and wicked barbs, but it is *real.*’

‘I can no longer tell what is real and what is invention,’ said Magnus, his towering form no longer as awesome and magisterial as before. ‘Everything grows further away from me. I reach for things I should know, but they retreat into the mist. I am losing it all, Amon. Why can’t I remember?’

‘Because you are split from yourself,’ said Amon. ‘But Ahriman leads a cabal of warriors in search of your splintered soul-shards.’

Magnus’ eye widened and he shook his head violently at the mention of the Legion’s Chief Librarian.

‘No!’ cried Magnus, surging to his feet. ‘No, Throne, no!’

‘You must be whole again, please!’

Magnus turned and staggered away as a deafening blast of thunder obscured his next words. He raged at the storm, as if daring it to strike him down.

A blast of zigzagging lightning split the sky.

It arced to the ground and detonated within the body of the avian statue. The stones toppled into a pile of fused rubble, and a core of fulgurite like a forked dagger fell from its interior. Thunder crashed across the tortured sky and Amon

lurched through the mud and rain after his anguished father. The servitors followed him, still dragging the floating throne in their wake.

Magnus once again drew his khopesh and lifted it high above his head.

'Do it! Do it now! Kill me!'

'No!' cried Amon as another fork of lightning speared downwards.

And this time it struck Magnus.

It blasted into the golden blade and through the primarch's body in a searing explosion. Magnus toppled to the ground, his armour fused and blackened, his immaterial flesh smoking and burned.

Amon rushed to his gene-sire's side and caught him as he fell.

He went down in the mire, his eyes wet with rain and tears.

Magnus tried to speak through blackened lips and bubbling flesh, but the words were unintelligible. His eye was a fused and molten ruin, unseeing and so terribly lost.

'Here! Now!' he yelled at the servitors.

Amon lifted his father from the ground, grief-stricken at how light and insubstantial he felt. The servitors obeyed and activated their device's life-preserving mechanisms.

'You will endure,' said Amon, placing the withered, metastasised form of Magnus into the support throne.

The soul-shard of Magnus within Ahriman's staff had set the *Osiris Panthea'*s course, but offered no clues as to its final destination. Ahriman's suspicion of where the Black Ship was taking them had grown to a certainty the instant the vessel translated from the Great Ocean. Every fibre of his being sang with dreadful anticipation of returning to Nikaea.

Shipboard horologs were conflicted on how long the *Osiris Panthea* had sailed the Great Ocean to get here – months or years, it was impossible to know. The stars in this region of space were askew and unfamiliar. No chart in the *Osiris Panthea'*s cartography database had a match for any of the local suns.

For all intents and purposes, this region of space was unexplored.

And yet the Thousand Sons knew this world well.

The journey towards Nikaea from the Mandeville point had taken many weeks, with every day feeling like a lifetime – every warrior filled with a mixture of fevered anticipation and dread.

None of them relished the thought of returning to this place of judgement. Their Legion had been publicly humbled and their primarch brought to heel by a cowardly cabal of faithless brothers.

No, a return to Nikaea was most unwelcome.

Abandoning the Black Ship, they dropped through the turbulent atmosphere in the back of a Stormbird, and Ahriman was acutely aware of the black mirror of

fate in which this descent was reflected.

He had last come to Nikaea with hope, which had been cruelly dashed.

Now he came with hope he would die to fulfil.

His nascent cabal flew with him in the lead Stormbird: Tolbek, Hathor Maat and Sanakht. Aforgomon's entirely blackened and rusted form sat apart from them. Even Camille Shivani descended to the surface with them. If today was to be the last act of this hunt, then Ahriman would face it with every asset at his disposal.

At the far end of the troop compartment, Lucius sat glaring down the compartment to the cockpit, where Sanakht flew them to the surface. Ahriman had heard of the battle the two swordsmen had fought on the *Osiris Panthea'*s bridge, and how Sanakht had ended the duel by slicing Lucius diagonally across his face from temple to chin.

Two other Stormbirds flew in loose formation with his own, bearing all the warriors they could muster. One gunship bore the Terminators of the Scarab Occult, led by Onuris Hex, as well as the Ankharu Blades of Memunim. The second carried Ignis and his Order of Ruin, together with Kiu's Sun Scarabs and the Feathered Ones of Nycteus.

Ahriman was restless and rose from the armoured bench-seat, holding on to hanging straps and stanchions to make his way to the cockpit.

He looked out through the armourglass.

Rain streaked the glass, black like the rain that poured during Prospero's demise. Ahriman scanned the slate-grey skies, but, seeing nothing beyond ashen clouds and roiling storm fronts, he returned his attention to the volcanic ground. The geometric landscape spread before him, jet-black and primordial.

'The genesis of a world,' said Ahriman, in unconscious echo of his gene-sire's words. 'How like our father to return to this place. The echoes of what happened here must have pulled him back – forcing him to relive his greatest shame on a planetary canvas.'

The cubes, spheres and fluted columns of extruded stone on the surface had been shattered by what looked like the handiwork of a vengeful god. Ahriman recognised the continent-cracking aftermath of a planetary bombardment in the thousands of overlapping impact craters, mass-driver gouges and vitrified canyons carved by macro lasers.

Ahriman risked a glance over his shoulder as the shattered flanks of a partially collapsed stratovolcano emerged from the sheeting rain. Once it had pierced the clouds and boasted a vast amphitheatre at its heart, but its soaring, steep-sided flanks had been blasted inwards, transforming it into a slumped pyramid of fused tephra and blackened basalt.

Psychic light burned at its heart, piercing the sky like a beacon and gleaming through the clouds, just as it had before.

'We are not the first to reach this place,' said Sanakht.

'I know,' said Ahriman.

Dark rain fell over the shattered ruins of the amphitheatre, making the basalt rocks glisten in the flickering lightning. Weeks of bombardment from orbit had permanently soured the planet's atmosphere, seeding it with heavy metals that gave the air a bitter, metallic taste that filled every breath with the tang of swallowed blood.

Guilt hung over Dio Promus like a shroud, a weight of failure he had never managed to shed, no matter how many times he told himself that Magnus had fooled them all.

Was this spot close to where he had stood and voiced his support of the Crimson King in the face of his accusers? Impossible to tell. The senior Librarians of many Legions had spoken to the character of Magnus the Red, painting a picture of a visionary whose only motive was the betterment of mankind. What had become of those warriors?

Fel Zharost and Umojen were now like him, warriors without a Legion and shadow-agents of the Regent. But of the others, he knew only rumours. Targutai Yesugei had gone to rejoin his Legion fighting the greenskins, his eventual fate unknown. Elikas of the First Legion…? Who could say? The Lion's warriors were a mystery even to themselves.

Of the rest, he knew almost nothing, but he feared the worst.

They had reached Nikaea less than ten hours ago, pushing the *Arethusa* and *Doramaar* hard to arrive before the Thousand Sons. It had proven to be a risk worth taking, as space around this cursed world was deserted save for the wrecks of the guidance barges employed during the bombardment. The fire-gutted hulks were circling in ever-decaying orbits, amid a low-hanging umbra of protean dust kicked up by the detonations.

In the normal run of things, it would be foolish to believe that two separate groups might meet here at even vaguely the same time. The vagaries of warp travel ensured that any such rendezvous could only be made with margins of error in the region of months or years.

Yet Dio Promus knew with frightening certainty that it would not be long before the Thousand Sons arrived at this place of judgement.

They would find Promus and his warriors awaiting them.

In essence, his plan was simple.

Use the soul-shards within Lemuel as bait to lure the Thousand Sons to the surface while Antaka Cyvaan hunted down and destroyed their ship in orbit.

When the Thousand Sons' means of escape was cut off, Magos Araxe would kill Lemuel.

Then Promus and the others would kill Ahriman's warriors.

He was under no illusions that this plan had only the slimmest possibility of success, but with few other practicals, it was the best they had.

'They are coming,' said Nagasena, two fingers pressed to the vox-bead in his ear that linked him to the *Doramaar*.

Watching three distant spots of light moving through the clouds towards the amphitheatre, Promus nodded.

'I know,' he said.

The great amphitheatre had been wrought as a palace of wonders, but repurposed by the Emperor into a place of bitter judgement. The stonework was imbued with null-properties, but compared to the inhibiting power of the *Osiris Panthea,* these were practically negligible.

Ahriman led his cabal and warriors through the rain-lashed ruins to where the hunters awaited. They moved swiftly, thirty-three of them, eager to be done with this place. He felt the auras of the warriors awaiting them like candle flames. Most flickered low and wavering, but others burned with numinous intensity.

Some he had felt on Kamiti Sona; others were unknown to him.

One figure, blurred in the rain, but blazing with inner light, was unmistakable. The power within Ahriman's staff pulled him towards this figure like a magnet. His heart beat faster, recognising there could only be one explanation for such an attraction.

Yet there was more than just this presence that drew him on.

Ahriman sensed something greater, something more powerful deep in the heart of Nikaea. Another soul-shard, or something else entirely?

The path led them onto a rubble-choked plateau that had once been the floor of the arena. His mind's eye filled in the tiered bench seats from which their accusers had spouted their fearmongering lies, and the podium upon which Malcador had levelled charges of sorcery.

And there were the ruins of the grand pavilion where the Emperor had passed judgement upon Magnus.

The Thousand Sons spread out, forming unfurled wings to either side of Ahriman and his cabal.

A ragtag band of warriors stood before them.

Fingers slipped around triggers and onto the activation runes of swords. It would take only the slightest spark to turn this arena into a battlefield. The simmering prospect of violence hung tantalisingly on the air.

Ahriman took stock of the enemies ranged against them.

His gaze was immediately drawn to a towering, orange-lacquered automaton holding a seething form he barely recognised by the neck. The vividness of the psychic might haloing the captive figure almost obscured his identity, but Ahriman would have recognised Lemuel Gaumon anywhere. *This* was the source of the attraction, and Ahriman blanched as he felt the inhuman power coursing through his former neophyte's body.

A priest of the Mechanicum he did not know stood next to the automaton, his withered body supported within a complex steel framework and suspensor fields. His aura spoke of great courage, masking a terrible and growing fear of his body's degeneration.

Ahriman sent a pulse of questioning thought towards Hathor Maat, who gave a slow nod in return.

+Then begin,+ he sent.

The Rune Priest Bjarki and his remaining Wolves stood to the left of the automata, and anger touched Ahriman as he saw Menkaura on his knees before a Wolf with a hideously burned face. A spiked collar shackled his friend and blunted his powers.

An armoured figure stood between Menkaura and Lemuel, one whose outline was a hateful void in the world and marked her as one of the Silent Sisterhood.

A swordsman clad in armour of the Dragon Nations stood protectively by a woman who dropped to her knees at the sight of Camille. Ahriman recognised Chaiya's face from the many times he had trawled Mistress Shivani's mind.

But it was to another legionary in rain-washed silver plate that Ahriman's gaze was drawn, for his aura was not unknown to him.

'You are Promus of the Thirteenth,' said Ahriman.

'I am, but Ultramar no longer has the highest claim on my loyalty.'

'Once, I would have said such a thing was impossible.'

'And I would have agreed with you.'

'You spoke in defence of the Crimson King,' continued Ahriman, seeing the Wolves flinch at his mention of Promus' previous support for Magnus.

Was that a wedge he could drive between them?

Yes, said a voice in his head he recognised as Aforgomon's. ***But I have a wedge that will drive deeper than any you might devise.***

'You spoke with great eloquence and unimpeachable logic,' said Ahriman. 'I thank you for that.'

'Yes, I spoke in support of Magnus, but do not think to use that against me. Not a day goes by without me wishing I had kept silent. Your primarch lied that day and betrayed us all.'

Ahriman planted his staff on the cracked stone floor of the arena and pointed to Lemuel.

‘You have something that does not belong to you,’ he said. ‘I would see it returned.’

Promus stepped forwards and shook his head.

‘Ahzek Ahriman, I name you *traitoris excommunicate* – an enemy of the Imperium and a faithless son of the Emperor. Prepare to die.’

Ahriman turned to Lucius and the swordsman flinched as Ahriman’s voice echoed within his skull.

+Be swift,+ he sent.

‘*Please,*’ said Lucius, ‘it’s me.’

The nullifying properties of Nikaea’s arena had been smashed by the bombardment. Complex geomantic arrangements of psychically inert materials had been blown to dust, and only the lingering traces of its power remained. To a warrior whose powers had been honed to a razor’s edge in the belly of a Black Ship, this was nothing.

Hathor Maat’s power was a subtle knife in the mind of the mortal Ahriman had indicated, a scalpel that softly reimagined the architecture of his neocortex. He did not rush his work, nor did he employ more power than was necessary. Excessive force would alert the Imperial psykers that something was amiss within one of their allies.

The decay of the meat within the man’s skull repelled Hathor Maat. He was dying, but more than that, his every waking moment was consumed with the terror of his body’s betrayal.

No better crack in armour than fear…

Hathor Maat plunged deep into the mind and body of Magos Umwelt Uexküll, undoing the damage done by the neurodegenerative disease and restoring life to dead cells and atrophied muscles. In the blink of an eye he undid years of decay and sickness. Muscles swelled with new growth and Hathor Maat felt hope flare in the man’s mind.

After fear, hope is the final twist of the knife.

Now he withdrew his power, and the creeping malady returned like a black corruption – an invisible battle fought at the cellular level.

Hathor Maat felt the man’s terror and poured power into him, driving back the disease once more. Over and over again he alternated curing and afflicting him, each act of healing accompanied by a whispered seduction.

He was dimly aware of Ahriman’s voice beyond the shell of bone in which he worked, but paid little attention to it. Whatever he was saying was irrelevant, simply a means to distract their enemies and give Hathor Maat time to bait the hook of betrayal.

Uexküll experienced his potential futures over and over at the speed of thought. He saw his body’s final, inevitable fall to the dreadful affliction. Hathor Maat

projected images of Uexküll lying twisted and soiled in a fused ball, abandoned by his fellow adepts as being too disgusting and too hideous to be around. He was a burden, cared for by only rancid, meat-bodied servitors until his body could endure no more and finally ended its wretched, pain-filled existence.

Hathor Maat poured his own terror of mutation and decay into this assault on Uexküll's mind, raising the man's fear to inhuman levels.

Then he unveiled his temptation.

Hathor Maat showed Uexküll as tall and powerful, blessed with physical perfection and a body that could resist all forms of disease and cellular entropy. Flesh that would never fail him, never weaken or become infirm.

A body raised up as a god amongst men.

Please! cried Uexküll within his own skull. *Heal me!*

+I will,+ promised Hathor Maat, +but I require something of you.+

Anything!

+Anything?+

Heal me and I am yours!

Lucius had never met another warrior his equal in terms of speed.

Yes, Sanakht was proficient – the scar bisecting his face was proof of that – but his skill with a blade was enhanced by precognitive powers. Even Nykona Sharrowkyn, the little raven who had killed him on the world of the fictive Angel Exterminatus, had been trained to wield powers beyond any normal warrior.

But in the end, neither was as naturally swift as Lucius.

He dived forwards, rolling to one knee and snapping his left arm out. The barbed whip unravelled from his wrist like the lashing tongue of an insectile predator.

It cracked the air like a gunshot.

The finely tapered end of the whip coiled around Sister Caesaria's neck like a garrotte. Spiteful thorns swelled as Lucius wrenched his arm back like a slamming piston.

Barbs and razor-fine edges tore through meat and metal.

Blood fountained as Caesaria's head fell from her shoulders.

And the greater portion of her pariah powers died with her.

Promus watched Sister Caesaria fall, her helmeted head rolling away into the rubble. He ducked for cover and shouted over to the robotic form of Magos Araxe.

'Kill Lemuel!' he roared. 'Do it now!'

But the piston-driven arm didn't crush Lemuel's neck.

Instead, it released him.

Araxe's robot body turned towards Magos Uexküll, and even though it possessed no features to which human emotions could be ascribed, Promus

sensed its confusion. Its limbs juddered as it attempted to move.

How had Magos Araxe's cybernetic body failed him?

A moment later he knew.

Beneath the steelwork struts of Uexküll's gibbet harness, Promus saw his previously waxy, grey and dying body was now smooth and pink. He tasted sorcery on the air, hidden by Sister Caesaria's power until now. Bjarki smelt the same thing and understood the significance of Uexküll's transformation a fraction of a second quicker than Promus.

'Maleficarum!' cried Bjarki, swinging his frost blade in a short, brutal arc. Driven by all the fury and power of Fenris, Bjarki's weapon clove Uexküll from shoulder to groin. Blood and oil sprayed as the betrayer's body fell to the rock of Nikaea, but the damage had already been done.

Lemuel stood unmolested before Magos Araxe, his body seething with newly unfettered power. He lifted from the rocky ground, gobbets of light dripping from his feet like molten glass.

Promus swung his bolter to bear on the host flesh of Magnus' soul-shards.

He snapped off a shot as dozens of weapons blazed.

In an instant, the space between the two forces was a hell storm of gunfire.

Yet none of it reached its intended target.

Scores of mass-reactives hung motionless in the air.

'No,' said Lemuel, rising farther into the air. 'This won't be settled by crude bullets and primitive blades. Not when there are so many buried secrets and revelations to be had.'

Promus squeezed the trigger of his weapon again, but it refused to fire. He looked over at Bjarki, who shrugged and shook his head.

The Thousand Sons looked equally surprised, stunned into immobility at this turn of events.

Had they not expected this?

Lemuel drifted higher, beyond the reach of any on the ground. Aether-fire wreathed his upraised limbs and cascaded from his body like sparks in a foundry.

'These ruins are ill-suited to so grand a moment,' shouted Lemuel, his eyes of cold fire sweeping the warriors below with inhuman disdain. 'Such dramas as are to unfold for each of us demand a grander setting.'

Dark rain boiled around Lemuel as he lifted yet higher and brought his arms down like the conductor of a grand orchestra at the moment of crescendo.

The basalt floor of the arena bucked, heaving upwards as the rock split apart and newly wrought structures speared towards the sky. Bladed pillars of geometric stone punched upwards with ferocious speed, showering the warriors below in shards heaved from the very depths of the planet. Choking veils of dust billowed as gleaming walls of crystal and glass arose, forcing the legionaries in

their path to separate or be crushed by their ascension. Promus vaulted the emerging walls and rising outcroppings of tessellated black stone as he ran towards Bjarki and his men.

‘Behold, the crystalline labyrinth!’ shouted Lemuel.

A city was being raised here, tapered obelisks and walls of glass, ranging from transparent to opaque and variations in between. Promus and the others were at the centre of a titanic structure, its every plane angular and sharp-edged. Mirrored walls formed an ever-growing pyramid of dark and smoky glass that rippled as if stained with fuliginous oil.

An ancient necropolis was surfacing like a city submerged beneath an ocean for aeons and now emerging from its long entombment. It was a dark inversion of a place once famed for its wonders and miracles. It took Promus a moment to connect what he was seeing here with what he had only read about in remembrancers’ verse or after-action reports.

‘This is Tizca,’ he said.

‘No,’ said Bjarki, before he and his warriors were obscured by rising crystal walls. ‘This is the Underverse.’

TWENTY-TWO

World's ending
Labyrinth
A single soul

Amon exerted his kine powers to prevent yet another towering megalith from toppling. The immense stone cracked and shed a rain of sharpened fragments, but its fall slowed until more of the Thousand Sons lent their power to help him direct its fall outwards.

The hundred-metre obelisk crashed to earth, throwing up a choking cloud of dust. Spalled shards of rock slashed down like napped flint blades. Amon nodded to his brothers, but they did not respond. He sensed the turmoil within them, and knew at least two were holding the horror of the flesh change at bay by the slenderest of margins.

Amon let them go and released a hot breath, sinking down to his haunches in exhaustion. Ice limned his armour and sheened his skin in fractal patterns of frost. Yet sweat ran from him in rivers. The repercussions of wielding his powers constantly were searing through his bloodstream like molten glass.

He pressed his palm to the ground, feeling the pained vibrations coming up through the rock. The world was unravelling beneath him, and he wished he had the strength to prevent its dissolution.

But only one among them had power enough for that.

All around Amon, the primitive city of the dead beasts lay in ruins, its pagan structures toppled by planet-wide earthquakes and global aether storms.

The ongoing cataclysm had drawn the Crimson King's remaining sons to his side, and they gathered in numbers not seen since first coming to the Planet of the Sorcerers. Each brought tales of insanity and destruction, of continents split apart, entire cities of light swallowed whole and the wounded heart of the world exposed.

They spoke of mountains of glass exploding into glittering razor storms, of iron plains raining ferrous metal precipitation into the sky, and oceans of darkness pouring off the edge of the world. Hundreds more told tales of madness and entropic decay, of the skin of the world shedding itself into the Great Ocean.

The Planet of the Sorcerers had only endured by Magnus maintaining its impossible structure and without him, their adoptive home world was tearing itself apart.

How long could it last without him?

Amon stood with a grimace of pain.

The marrow in his spine ground like broken glass as he picked a path through the ruins towards Magnus. The sky blazed with lightning, reflecting on the war-plate of his brothers as they waited for their world to end.

When did we become so fatalistic?

We were once agents of change, a Legion who embodied notions of growth and development.

How we have fallen…

High overhead, Amon's clockwork pyramid rotated with stately grace, two thousand metres above the exact centre of the city of menhirs. Its sides coruscated with flickering lightning and tens of thousands of the bejewelled manta-creatures circled its bronzed flanks. Amon limped towards the stretching and undulating shadow cast by his sanctum. If this world was indeed doomed, then he would face its end by his father's side.

Whispers and narrowed eyes followed Amon as he drew nearer to the centre of the city. His brother legionaries blamed him for what had become of their gene-sire, and he knew they were right to do so. Had it not been his argument that convinced their primarch to put aside his great work and return to face his degeneration? Had it not been Amon who bound him to this new and terrible fate?

Directly beneath the bronzed pyramid, Magnus the Red sat surrounded by his grieving sons. Some flanked him in the self-assigned role of praetorians, while others knelt before him like supplicants before a king.

Amon felt his heart break anew.

The Crimson King's burned body sat locked within the support throne in which Amon had been forced to place him. Its metal had writhed and run like molten gold moments after Amon had interred the primarch within its life-sustaining mechanisms.

It had flowed over Magnus' body to enfold him in a gleaming web, before writhing downwards to split the rock like the roots of a tree. It resembled the baroque throne of some ancient emperor, a prison and life-support in one.

Amon lifted his gaze and stared into his father's blackened, metastasised features; it was impossible to tell whether he was alive or dead, or existing in some state in between. He saw depthless pain in his primarch's eye as it stared out over a realm that would die without him, but was killing him with every passing moment.

Magnus had brought them here to save them from death at the hands of the Wolves, but Amon had condemned them to a far worse fate instead.

'Where are you, Ahriman?' he whispered.

Where am I?

The crystalline walls rose up like blades, driving the Thousand Sons apart and isolating the warbands from each other. Ahriman saw warriors crushed between converging walls or impaled on rising blades of glass.

He rolled aside as a confluence of walls slammed together with the sound of glass breaking. Their surfaces were darkly translucent and veined with ribbons of ruddy illumination like sluggish blood vessels.

The rough gravel and sand of the arena was gone, replaced with a reflective marble floor in which wheeling stars turned with a soft illumination.

Ahriman…

He looked up at the sound of his name, but a dizzying vertigo seized him as he saw the walls to either side of him soared to impossible heights, meeting at a far-distant vanishing point.

'What is this place?' said Tolbek, picking himself up and igniting fire at his fingertips.

'Can't you tell?' said Hathor Maat, down on his knees with his bunched fists held tight to his chest.

'I wouldn't ask if I could,' snapped Tolbek.

'It's Tizca,' said Ahriman, rising to his feet. 'Or at least another *version* of it.'

'Where's Sanakht?' said Hathor Maat. 'Or anyone else for that matter?'

Ahriman turned a full circle, but could see no sign of the swordsman. He listened for any indications that the rest of his warbands were nearby.

He heard nothing.

'We are to face this alone,' he said, edging forwards and keeping his hand pressed to the dark glass. It was warm to the touch and thrummed with a subtle vibration, like the iron bulkhead of a starship.

Ahriman…

'Did you hear that?' he asked.

'Hear what?' asked Hathor Maat.

'My name,' said Ahriman. 'Someone called my name. You didn't hear it, either of you?'

'No,' said Tolbek.

Hathor Maat shook his head.

Ahriman nodded to himself. Very well, if this was the game, then he would play it for now.

'Then it's onwards,' he said. 'To the heart of the crystal labyrinth.'

Ahriman set off, with Tolbek and Hathor Maat following in his wake. The passageway continued onwards for what might have been a few hundred metres, but could have been far longer. The gradual motion within the depths of the

crystalline walls made it next to impossible to gauge how far they had travelled with any degree of accuracy.

He pushed on, taking turns at random, but crafting mnemonics to allow him to navigate back should that prove necessary. Yet a nagging sensation told him that even were he to turn back now, his return path would already have changed.

Ahriman…

'No,' he said. 'I'll not fall prey to temptation. Not here.'

'Who are you talking to?' asked Hathor Maat.

'No one. Myself, perhaps.'

Ahriman made a left turn, arriving at a crossroads with identical passages splitting off in three directions. With nothing to differentiate them, Ahriman led his brothers right this time and his eyes were drawn inexorably to the swirling galaxies within the walls – so real it felt as if he could reach inside and touch them.

Yes…

His hand reached towards the spray of stars deep within the substance of the wall. Only at the last instant did he stop.

The reflected hand in the glass was not his own.

All is dust…

Ahriman looked up to see a warrior standing on the other side of the glass wall. A legionary in the war-plate of the Thousand Sons, but blackened at its edges as if seared by heat powerful enough to scorch ceramite.

Ahriman…

'Sobek?'

Hundreds of figures were arrayed in motionless, serried ranks behind his dead Practicus. They each stared at him with one accusing eye, the other a ravaged socket from which poured fine streams of dust.

Sobek lifted his arm and slammed his fist against the wall. Splintering cracks spread from the impact.

I won't let you kill us all.

Bjarki reached up to grasp the wolf-tail talisman hanging from the pauldrons of his war-plate. Olgyr Widdowsyn and Svafnir Rackwulf stood behind him as the gleaming walls rose around them.

The arena of Nikaea was gone, and the Wolves found themselves at the centre of a cavern formed from glittering ice. Its walls shone like mirrors, throwing their distorted reflections back at them in infinitely repeating patterns. Sulphurous wisps of smoke rose from cracks in the rocky floor, together with what sounded like the creaking and groaning of lost ships trapped beneath the ice. A number of shadow-wreathed archways were carved into the walls, each with obscene symbols gouged in the rock.

Breath misted before them.

‘Is this truly the Underverse?’ said Widdowsyn.

Bjarki shrugged. ‘Maybe. Or maybe it is someone’s idea of what the Underverse is *supposed* to look like.’

‘Then where are the wights?’

Ululating howls echoed weirdly from the shadowed archways, drawing ever closer.

‘You and your stupid mouth,’ said Rackwulf, his words distorted and slurred by the gaping wound in the side of his face.

Howls echoed from the walls again, closer this time.

‘You really think those are wights?’ asked Widdowsyn. ‘I always imagined them to sound… *bigger*.’

‘Shut up,’ said Rackwulf. ‘You want to make this worse?’

‘If they are wights, we will find out soon enough,’ said Bjarki, seeing something moving in the ice out of the corner of his eye. Something that moved with jerky, twisted motion.

Something broken.

‘Formation: Russ at the Tower of Dulan,’ he said.

The others understood immediately, and moved to stand back to back with him, shoulder to shoulder as brothers.

‘The walls,’ said Bjarki. ‘Look to them.’

He kept his gaze loose and unfocused, knowing something was watching them, but unsure as to where it lurked. His senses, both physical and psychic, reached out. A biliousness climbed his throat as he sensed foul corruption on the air, the rank smell of maleficarum.

‘Show yourself,’ he commanded.

The mirrored walls rippled with motion, and the blackened form of a withered, skeletal thing stepped towards the front of the glassy surface. Every facet of the walls threw its reflection around the cavern, and Bjarki recognised it as the scorched cybernetic accompanying the Thousand Sons. He had paid it little attention, but now saw its metalled body was not black with burning, but a sickness seeping from within like a cancer.

A hissing runic form crackled on its chest, once golden but now tarnished and all but obscured. The hundred versions of its reflection lifted their heads in unison.

‘You are Bödvar Bjarki,’ it said, ***‘Rune Priest to Jarl Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot of Tra, blood-brother of Ulvurul Heoroth, called*** **Longfang.’**

‘I am, but do not speak the names of my kin again,’ warned Bjarki.

‘Very well, warrior of the Rout,’ said the creature.

Bjarki let his gaze roam around the creature's body, seeing no hint of the blocky, functional forms of the Martian priesthood in its bodyplan. This machine's form had once been sleek and elegant, but was now barely hanging together.

'You were not wrought by the priests of Iron, that much is obvious,' said Bjarki. 'So what are you?'

'What am I? Ah, that is a question the empyreosophists have debated for millennia,' said the creature. ***'The old word for my kind is daemon, but you may call me Aforgomon.'***

'Daemon will do,' said Bjarki, moving away from his brothers and pacing towards the centre of the chamber. His every sense was alive to the terrible danger this creature represented, and his hackles rose as he saw the twin flames burning at its heart.

'What do you want?' he asked. 'Are you bound by ancient sorcery to the Thousand Sons and want me to free you? If I do, will you grant me great power?'

'I can,' said the hundreds of reflected daemons. ***'We could make a pact, you and I, as I have made with Ahriman.'***

Bjarki laughed. 'No, I'll make no pacts with you, but tell me more of the pact you made with the traitor.'

The daemon shook its head and waved an admonishing finger.

'No, for even he does not yet understand what he has bargained away.'

'Then why are we here? Do you want to try to tempt us? Go ahead, let me hear what you have to offer. But if you know anything of me and my Legion, you will know that no warrior of Fenris would ever embrace maleficarum.'

'How little you know, Wolf,' said Aforgomon. ***'But I did not bring you to this part of the Crimson King's soul to talk of things yet to be. Rather, secrets you should know.'***

'Secrets I should know?' said Bjarki. 'And why would I trust anything you have to say?'

'Because you will recognise truth when you hear it.'

'Which is more than I can say for your kind.'

The howling came again from the cave mouths, and Aforgomon flinched at the sound.

'You should know that my essence is a much-feared aspect of the Pantheon, what the neverborn seers call fatewoven – pure unpredictability and chaos.'

'That does not make me inclined to trust you.'

'Perhaps not, but all ages of great change are nothing more than chains of fatewoven moments, instants where the smallest decision has enormous consequences. This is one such moment.'

Bjarki paced in a circle, trying to gauge if any one of the many reflected images were any more *real,* any more able to be destroyed. He could see no difference in any of the daemon's reflections.

'That sounds far too clever for a savage like me to understand,' said Bjarki. 'Like something one of the red sorcerers of Prospero might say.'

Aforgomon shrugged and said, ***'Perhaps I have travelled too long in their company, but I will be gone soon.'***

'Then tell your secret and be gone, daemon,' said Bjarki.

'Let me tell you of Promus,' said the daemon, leaning into the glass. ***'Let me tell you of the*** **great deeds** ***he has performed in your Emperor's name.'***

Lucius moved through the darkened halls of the labyrinth, more amused than awed by the instantaneous construction of this towering structure. He was alone, and Lucius hated being alone. With no audience to pander to and no victim to taunt, his thoughts turned ever inwards, and Lucius was self-aware enough to know that the inner workings of his psyche was a place in which he did not care to dwell.

Instead, he forced his thoughts outwards, considering where he might venture when this endeavour of the Thousand Sons finally bored him. Bitterness touched Lucius, and he reached up to run his finger along the scar bisecting his once perfect features. Wherever he went next, he would first require Hathor Maat to restore his perfect beauty, repercussions be damned.

Perhaps he would return to his Legion brothers to show them his new features and learn what fresh sensory extremes they had explored.

Or should he narrow his focus to a particular aspect of profligacy?

The Iron Warriors were too hidebound for Lucius to even countenance joining, and the morose Death Guard would surely drive him to open his wrists. Perhaps he might seek out warriors of Angron to follow. Their single-minded devotion to carnage might be diverting for a time.

Or perhaps the Sons of Horus?

Yes. Proximity to the Warmaster would surely hone his indulgences to their keenest edge.

His peripheral vision saw swirling motion within the walls, but Lucius ignored it. He knew enough of the neverborn's machinations to guess that all he would see would be banal horrors of mutilated flesh and sensuality.

Lucius…

'You are wasting your time,' he said to the air. 'Trust me, whatever temptations of the flesh you are conjuring, know that my brothers of the Emperor's Children have long since wrung even the most extreme practices dry of sensation.'

The motion in the walls intensified, and Lucius grinned as he reached a T-junction. Passageways ran to his left and right, swimming with shimmering light.

‘What can things of the warp that have never known flesh teach a son of Fulgrim of physical pleasure or pain? You know nothing of either. You are echoes of what *we* feel, pale ghosts masquerading as sensation.’

It’s not just about the blade…

Lucius paused, his heart racing.

He had heard those words before.

‘Loken?’

Too fast for you, traitor.

Lucius spun as another voice spoke from the opposite wall.

He knew that voice too.

‘Sharrowkyn.’

Lucius turned and for the briefest instant saw the faint outline of a darkly armoured figure within the glass. Lucius blinked, unsure he had even seen the shape.

You are nothing to me – simply a rabid dog that needs to be put down.

A line of fire sliced across his back, and he spun in time to see a shadow flit past the wall. His sword was in his hands an instant later. He felt blood well from a hideously sharp line down his spine. Despite the pain, he was impressed. Corax’s warrior had been fast, but Lucius had forgotten just *how* fast.

‘Come out, come out, little Raven,’ said Lucius, letting the coils of his whip slither from around his left wrist. ‘Ready for a rematch?’

He turned a slow circle, his eyes seeking a target.

Your thoughts betray you.

Lucius gritted his teeth. First Loken, then Sharrowkyn, and now Sanakht.

Fresh pain lanced into his side and his sword came down to block a weapon that wasn’t there. Stabbing pain shot through the small of his back and he staggered, dropping to one knee.

‘Fight me!’ yelled Lucius, surging to his feet as the three warriors stepped from the glass walls like ghosts: Loken clad in the pale ivory of the Luna Wolves, Sharrowkyn all in black and Sanakht in crimson. They surrounded him, but Lucius had fought worse odds than this and triumphed.

Three of the greatest bladesmen that he had ever faced.

Now, *this* was a fight he would relish.

Loken attacked first, going in low with a stabbing thrust of a gladius. Lucius blocked it, rolling his wrist and slamming a hard jab into the Luna Wolf’s face. He felt bone break. Loken fell back and broke apart into shadows. Sharrowkyn’s twin blades scissored over Lucius’ back. He bit down on a scream and spun on his heel, his sword slicing deep into the Raven Guard’s neck.

He too fled into broken shadows.

Lucius threw up his whip to entangle Sanakht's blade, fouling it for long enough to drive his blade to the hilt in the swordsman's belly.

A screeching wail shook the walls as the ghost of Sanakht fell away. Lucius roared in triumph and punched the air with his sword arm. Laughter bubbled upwards from deep within him, almost hysterical. His eyes were wide with pain and savage joy at having defeated the only three warriors ever to best him.

The grin fell from his mouth as he saw a last warrior facing him from the glass. A figure of perfection, clear-eyed and with a rakishly handsome face.

He barely remembered it any more.

Lucius felt his fingers tighten on the grip of his sword.

His whip tensed in anticipation.

He'd destroyed his face once before, and he would do it again, but this time he would use a sword instead of a razored shard of glass.

Show me how you fight. Show me how you win.

Lucius threw himself at the reflection, his sword slashing for the glass. The blade smashed through. Glass splintered and flew. A shard cut deep into his face.

Lucius didn't care. Pain meant nothing.

His reflection taunted him.

You can beat everyone else, but you'll never beat me.

Lucius pushed into the glass, his cuts ferocious and merciless. A hurricane of bladed fragments swirled around him. Blood poured in torrents where lethal shards sliced his face.

Skin peeled back, muscles lifted from bone.

He roared with inchoate fury, loss and loathing mingled.

Deeper in he went, a blitzing storm of glass and hate.

The shattered glass reformed behind him, swallowing Lucius and leaving no sign he had ever walked its inconstant passageways.

Another weak mind snared by the crystalline labyrinth.

Ahriman ran through the passages of the pyramid with his brothers at his side. They took turnings at random, attempting to throw off the shambling, dust-filled suits of armour that followed Sobek from the shattered walls.

But no matter how many turns they took, their pursuers were always just behind them. Ahriman led them through wide galleries of crystal, down serpentine passages and into echoing vaults that shimmered with myriad colours, as though the Great Ocean itself pressed against the glass.

For all he understood of their surroundings, perhaps it did.

Bolts did not stop Sobek's slow and purposeful advance, nor did psychic powers hinder the fleshless forms of his army.

At each turn, the living Thousand Sons saw more of the shambling, automaton-like warriors in the livery of their Legion, but some trick of the undersea quality

of the illumination imparted a strange azure cast to their war-plate.

'They will never stop,' said Hathor Maat, staggering as if in great pain, though he had suffered no injury as far as Ahriman could tell.

'Then neither do we,' snapped Tolbek.

They paused at the end of a wide chamber that offered numerous ways onwards. Ahriman walked a slow circle with his pulsing heqa staff held before him.

'Does it offer any insight as to which way offers an escape?' said Hathor Maat.

'Escape is not what I seek,' he said.

'It's not?' said Hathor Maat, standing and bunching his fists at his stomach. 'Then what *are* you seeking?'

The pain in Hathor Maat's voice was impossible to miss.

Ahriman had heard pain like that before and knew what it portended. So too did the others, and each kept a wary eye on the adept of the Pavoni.

'A way onwards,' said Ahriman. 'Our path is being directed.'

'To where?' demanded Tolbek, the flames of his order flickering in the lenses of his helm.

'I believe we are being led to the heart of this pyramid.'

'Why?' asked Sanakht.

Ahriman said, 'The power I sensed within Lemuel *wants* us here. I know it.'

'Then I will buy you the time you need to reach it,' said Sanakht as the slow and purposeful warriors accompanying Sobek appeared behind them once more. 'I will find a choke point and hold them as the Lion Emperor did at the Hot Gates.'

'The Lion Emperor and all his men died,' pointed out Tolbek.

'No one will be dying here,' said Ahriman, feeling insight from the power bound to his staff. 'We keep going. *All* of us.'

He plunged deeper into the structure, hearing the flapping of giant feathered wings, screaming and a terrible, low moaning that came from the walls themselves, yet faded as soon as he sought to pinpoint its location. The labyrinth obeyed no laws of perspective or causality Ahriman knew.

Onwards and deeper until, without warning, they emerged into the immense, impossible chamber at the heart of the labyrinth.

It was a hundred times larger than the Pyramid of Photep, its crystalline walls tapered to a point above a seething layer of storm-wracked clouds. Spears of lightning ripped through the air and bathed the chamber with flickering electric-blue illumination.

Ahriman's heart lurched in despair as he looked up.

The titanic form of Magnus the Red, hundreds of metres tall, hung suspended in the air just below the clouds – a slain colossus, mightier in scale than an

Imperator battle-engine. His black-and-bronze armour was scorched and his head hung low over his chest, his crimson hair limp across his face.

Ahriman heard gasps of astonishment from his brothers as they craned their necks upwards in amazement, and his hope that this vision was some form of hallucination was dashed.

The Crimson King's vast arms were thrown out to the sides and Ahriman saw the substance of his body was being slowly eaten away, like the charred embers of thick parchment as it burns in a crucible. Tendrils of coiling smoke unravelled from the colossal body, floating like swirling cinders.

The drifting lines of power unweaving from the suspended corpse poured into a figure of dark energy floating before it.

Even from hundreds of metres away, Ahriman recognised Lemuel Gaumon. The soul-shards wearing his skin and bone were lambent skeletons oozing out of his flesh, growing in power as they drew this last soul-shard into the remembrancer's body.

A host of capering horrors seethed below Magnus, an undulant wave of daemonic flesh, grasping hands, distended eyes and gnashing fangs. They raised claws skywards as if seeking to catch the lightning or pull the body of Magnus back to earth.

Movement drew Ahriman's eyes and he saw other figures staggering from the labyrinthine interior of the pyramid. He saw the frost-armoured forms of the three Wolves charge out, and almost laughed as he saw their sudden shock at seeing the vast body overhead.

He saw Promus and the warrior of the Dragon Nations emerge from other clefts in the walls. Camille Shivani and Chaiya Parvati also stumbled from the maze, immediately making their way towards one another with joyous cries.

Last of all came Menkaura.

The Corvidae seer's face was a mask of blood. He fell to the ground, his fingers red and clawed. Ahriman saw both his eyes were gone, gouged from their sockets by his own hands. What horrors had Menkaura seen in the depths of the maze to cause such self-inflicted mutilation?

'What in Prospero's name…?' said Tolbek.

'Is that really Magnus?' Hathor Maat asked, sinking to his knees and fumbling at his gorget with trembling hands.

Ahriman had no answer for him, and nodded to Sanakht, who moved behind the kneeling Pavoni adept, knowing exactly what might be required.

'*It is Magnus,*' said a rasping voice now stripped of any semblance of humanity. **'*The part of his soul that died here when his father betrayed the promise He made to His son.*'**

The Thousand Sons turned as Aforgomon limped from the labyrinth behind them. The yokai's body was all but ruined, a blackened shell roiling with seething corruption within. How it remained upright was a mystery, for every joint leaked oily black secretions, and the metal of its form was rusted and flaking with every crippled step it took.

'Your time in this world is ending,' said Ahriman, with no small amount of satisfaction.

'In this form,' said Aforgomon, the words now strained and wet, like the last words of a dying man whose lungs were filling with blood. ***'But I will endure.'***

'What does that mean?' said Tolbek, circling the yokai.

'Ask Ahzek and he will tell you.'

'Ahriman?' said Tolbek. 'What does it mean?'

'Nothing,' said Ahriman, as the pressure seals around Hathor Maat's helm disengaged with a hiss of vapour. 'It speaks of a pact long since broken between us.'

Tolbek took a step towards Ahriman, igniting his fists with a pulse of thought, and said, 'Beneath the mountain on Terra you swore there would be no more secrets between us. Tell me what the daemon means.'

Ahriman gestured to the Wolves and Promus as they fought their way through the daemonic hosts towards the centre of the chamber in a blaze of psychic light.

'We do not have time for this,' he said, turning away.

'Tell me,' said Tolbek, gripping his arm. 'And tell me *now*.'

Ahriman rose into the fifth enumeration, knowing he might be forced to kill Tolbek. Anger surged through him at his brothers' ingratitude at all he had done to save them.

'Do you remember on the Torquetum, being a heartbeat from death at the claws of the Voydes of Drekhye?'

'Aye,' said Tolbek. 'What of it?'

'There was only one way to save you,' said Ahriman, letting the power of the Great Ocean seep into his limbs. 'I made a pact with Aforgomon. Every one of you would be dead but for that.'

'What did you promise it?'

'A single soul.'

'Whose?'

'I did not know at the time. It spoke in riddles.'

'But you know now?'

Aforgomon collapsed to the ground, its legs buckled and no longer able to bear its weight.

'He knows,' said Aforgomon, its chest cavity exposed as it slumped onto all fours. ***'The prince with eyes of dust, a heart of ice, a soul of mirrors and the***

face of a god.'

Dust and oil spilled from within the yokai's body, along with fading motes of sickly yellow light. In moments it would be gone, its daemonic form drawn back to the depths of the Great Ocean. Power built in Ahriman's hands, ready to push the daemon fully into its dissolution. Aforgomon felt his power build and shook its head.

'You will fail without my help, Ahzek,' gurgled the yokai.

'What help can you give me? You are dying.'

'Give me… what I want… and find out…'

Ahriman tore his gaze from the dying creature.

The vast corpse of Magnus was diminishing by the second, every second of its dissolution empowering the shards within Lemuel. Beneath the mighty form of his Legion's gene-sire, Dio Promus and his allies fought their way ever closer to the heart of the pyramid.

'Aforgomon speaks the truth,' said Ahriman, turning to his brothers as his heart became cold steel. 'I know who it wants.'

TWENTY-THREE

Eyes of dust
No practical
Guilty

Bjarki's eyes were fixed on Promus' back as they forged a path through the wights. Others called them daemons, but the warriors of the Rout knew their true name. The creatures gibbered with corpse laughter and hooting bellows, their flesh a vile blend of rubber and glossy meat.

Winter's fire blazed along the length of his frost blade, and he clove the wights with every swing. Rackwulf fought to his left, his great barbed spear bursting the monstrous beasts like fleshy sacs of multi-coloured blood. Olgyr Widdowsyn sang the old sagas of Fenris, swinging his sword as though the Wolf King himself were watching.

Every blow was an act of vengeance, and every stride took them closer to where the daemonhost drew power from the floating idol of the Crimson King. Lightning slammed down five paces to his left and exploded in a blinding detonation of unnatural flesh.

After-images danced behind Bjarki's eyes. Leering faces and twisted grins flashed in his mind. He blinked away the lingering traces of the images as a beast with flesh of raw pink meat threw itself at him. Its hooked fingers were like spider's legs clawing for his face. A pulse of thought sent the blazing ice of Fenris through its body and it exploded in a spray of azure flesh scraps.

Hundreds more bounded into the fight, idiot laughter spraying from their gaping, fang-toothed maws as they trampled one another in their hunger to attack.

Bjarki's hunter's eye spotted an immediate danger.

'Nagasena,' he yelled, as a pair of the blue-skinned daemons hurled themselves at the mortal swordsman. Nagasena spun low, his sword flashing in a vertical cut. He disembowelled one as it flew over him. The second smashed him to the ground as Bjarki had known it would. It reared up, jaws spread wide enough to bite Nagasena's skull clean from his shoulders.

Widdowsyn slammed a booted foot into the creature's flank.

It detonated in a welter of variegated ichor. Widdowsyn scooped Nagasena up and put him back on his feet without breaking his stride.

Nagasena nodded his thanks, too winded to speak.

'Keep up,' snapped Widdowsyn.

Dio Promus blazed with psychic light as he bludgeoned a path through the monstrous host. Lightning hurled from above slammed down in blitzing spears around him, misting the air with burning daemonflesh. His fists were ablaze with light as he crushed the daemons before him. Bjarki studied the warrior of Ultramar as he fought: a superb fighter, alloying fury and discipline in perfect balance. The cold logic of Macragge wedded to the violence inherent in the Legions.

Regret touched Bjarki, but he pushed it aside.

Service to the Allfather allowed for no sentimentality.

Bjarki ducked as a pack of whip-bodied creatures formed of slick flesh and raw meat vomited gouts of fire from a host of screaming orifices. Bjarki's hood flared with light and the flames guttered a metre from his body.

He threw himself at the flaming beasts, striking left and right to utterly eviscerate them. Glittering, immaterial fire licked over his armour at their deaths. They screamed as he slew them, the sound like a burning ice rigger being drawn down into the ocean.

'Do we have a plan?' said Widdowsyn, his armour spattered in the oily, iridescent blood of their foes.

'Aye,' said Bjarki, wrenching his blade from a disintegrating corpse. 'But you will not like it.'

'Do we get to live by the end of it?' asked Rackwulf, sweeping his fearsome spear around in a killing arc. The daemons knew to be wary of it, but cackled with glee each time it claimed one of their fellows.

Bjarki looked towards the embattled Dio Promus as he fought the daemons like the Avenging Son himself.

'Not all of us.'

'Step away, Ahriman,' said Tolbek.

Even Sanakht, loyal Sanakht, looked at him with fear.

I have fallen far when even my brothers view me with horror.

'This is the price of our father's life,' he said, raising his staff. 'There is no other way.'

'Whatever it has promised you is a lie,' said Tolbek. 'You *know* this, Ahzek. You can trust nothing it says.'

'I do not, but it has power. And, now more than ever, I need that power.'

Ahriman swept his gaze over his brothers. Each of them was powerful in his own way, so what quality was it that had made Aforgomon choose one over the other?

He could not know, and approached Hathor Maat, whose head was bowed over his chest, his breathing coming in spasming hikes.

'Hathor Maat,' he said.

The legionary lifted his head, and Ahriman's resolve almost crumbled in the face of the naked terror he saw in his brother's face. Pale and clammy, his muscles squirmed beneath skin that blistered with subcutaneous growths.

'Help. Me.'

Tolbek took a step towards him, and Ahriman felt the Pyrae adept's mind move into a combative stance. Sanakht's blades slid a handspan from their sheaths.

'Ahzek, don't,' said the swordsman. 'He is one of us.'

'Not for long,' said Ahriman. 'The flesh change is upon him. His life is at an end. It will be a mercy to end his suffering.'

'Then let me end him cleanly,' said Sanakht, his blades of black and white singing from their scabbards. 'Let him die with honour as a legionary of the Thousand Sons, not as an offering to this *thing.*'

'No,' said Ahriman, knowing what must come next.

Sanakht lunged for him and Tolbek let fire ignite around his fists. Ahriman let slip the bindings around his staff and allowed a measure of the Crimson King's power to flow into his flesh.

It came in a torrent, like liqnite through his veins.

The effect was instantaneous.

Ahriman clenched his fist and the fire within Tolbek was extinguished utterly. Tolbek staggered, as though some vital element had been sapped from him. He collapsed and the breath from his opened mouth was freighted with the chill of the grave.

Sanakht's blade twisted aside and Ahriman felt the swordsman's frustration at his rebellious muscles. Ahriman sent another jolt of power through Sanakht's body, jerking him like a demented marionette.

'I am sorry, brothers,' said Ahriman.

Aforgomon somehow forced itself to its feet, the once pristine body it had possessed now little more than ash held together by will and desire.

'Do it, Ahzek,' it wheezed. ***'It has to be now!'***

Ahriman spun on his heel and slammed the butt of his heqa staff against the last remaining gleam of the invocatus symbol upon the yokai's skull.

He screamed as he struck, the blow weighted with desperation, guilt and regret. The thing's head came apart in a detonation of softened ceramite fragments. The body dropped straight down, coming apart in a mist of sodden ash.

A shadowed after-image bloomed from the wreckage of its form, a revenant of dark light, coiled impossibly dense within its artificial shell.

'Throne forgive me!' yelled Ahriman. 'Take him!'

The shadowed umbra swooped on Hathor Maat and pushed itself inside him like a cloud of microscopic fireflies invading his every pore.

Hathor Maat's body jerked upright, lifted into the air by the inhuman force filling him. His mouth stretched wide, the plates of his battle armour shattering as the body within swelled to unimaginable proportions.

A piercing screech, like a thousand murders of crows, issued from Hathor Maat's mouth as it ripped across his face, tearing the skin and muscle wide open. His skull split apart and a mist of blood swirled as the two portions writhed and swelled, darkening from pallid bone to a vivid blue.

'What have you done?' cried Sanakht as warp light blazed from Hathor Maat's contorting form. The Pavoni bent over as the muscles on his back expanded to monstrous proportions and a pair of feathered wings erupted from his flesh in a spray of blood and gristle.

His form continued to expand, the legs cracking and splintering as they reshaped into reverse-jointed horrors of feather and claw. The amorphous, gory masses of his skull elongated and twisted like birthing snakes as they transformed into two serpentine necks topped with bulbous growths that undulated like birth sacs.

The sacs ruptured and two avian heads, ebon-beaked and filled with secret malice, were born. They screeched with a wail that split reality and made every daemon within the chamber fall to the ground in adulation at this great lord of the Pantheon arisen within their midst.

The daemon towered over Ahriman, a bipedal creature with wide pinions of rippling azure. Its twin heads slid through the air, one fixing Ahriman with its piercing eyes of dead white, the other spouting a litany of nonsense doggerel of veiled meaning.

'You seek power, Ahzek Ahriman,' it said. ***'And you shall have it.'***

There was no practical for this.

No training on Ultramar had prepared Promus for a battle such as he faced now. He waded through the host of foes, striking all around him and using his powers like never before. The fire of Macragge that poured from his gauntlets burned all it touched, scorching the beasts to guttering pools of waxen residue.

They split and reformed, sullen and grim-eyed where once they had chittered with inhuman laughter as they clawed his armour. He fired his bolter one-handed, impossible to miss in the sea of nightmarish creatures. Lightning flickered around him, battering the ground with explosive detonations.

Promus looked up at the colossus floating overhead.

Its form was unravelling, drawn out in smoky trails by the thing inhabiting Lemuel Gaumon.

Not much longer until he was in range.

More lightning slashed around him, a blitzing storm of raw power. The ground buckled, throwing up great chunks of protean stone and dust. Promus forged

through it all, leaping great chasms as they ripped across the ground.

He had no idea if Bjarki or any of the others were still with him. All his attention was focused forwards. Killing and moving. Moving and killing. He mag-locked his bolter to his thigh, saving his last shells, and took a two-handed grip on his blade.

His steps were slowing, the mass of bodies growing too thick for him to easily sweep aside. He lost track of time, his world shrinking to his immediate sphere of combat – the swing of the blade, a crack of a fist, the piston blow of a kick. He lost count of the daemons he killed, no longer capable of discerning any difference between them.

The press of bodies all around him was growing ever stronger, scores of rubber-fleshed horrors clambering over him in search of his eyes with chisel-nailed fingertips.

Promus roared and took a knee, his sword planted before him. He shouted the name of Guilliman, and a corona of blue fire exploded from the blade. Daemons burned to cinders and he rose to his feet as the tsunami of destruction rolled outwards. He strode through the charred remains of the daemons. His steps were laboured now, his body wracked by the toll of wielding such power, but he was where he needed to be.

Promus looked up through blurred sight.

The colossus of Magnus was nearly gone, its substance all but unravelled. Lemuel's flesh was practically transparent, the stolen power burning him alive from within.

Promus unsnapped his bolter from his thigh and took aim, centring the sights over the back of Lemuel's skull. The man's body hung steadily in the air, rippling with power.

An easy shot.

'Theoretical – you die and Magnus dies with you,' he said.

Promus poured power into the bolts, feeling the cold hardness of the metal, the chemical mix of propellant and explosives, imbuing them with every hexagrammatic ward he knew.

'Practical – don't miss.'

Promus squeezed the trigger three times in quick succession.

He saw the warded bolts fly as true as if he'd fired them on a clear day at the firing range.

One for the head, two for the chest.

All three bolts burned to ash moments before impact.

Lemuel turned his gaze towards Promus, and his eyes lit up with spiteful amusement as he saw the battle raging below, as if he were only now aware of the chaos he had unleashed.

Lemuel laughed and the cruelty Promus heard was terrifying.

The remembrancer slashed his hand downwards and a searing lance of fire flew at Promus.

It struck him in the gap between his gorget and shoulder guard, punching down through his ribcage. It vaporised the bone shield over his ribs and flash-burned his primary heart to ash. One lung detonated within his chest as the air it contained expanded with explosive force.

Promus' sword blade shattered into a storm of fragments, and razor-edged shards sliced across his face. The fire punched down through the meat and muscle of his pelvis to shatter every bone between his hip and ankle before exploding outwards and blowing out the lower half of his left shin.

The pain was excruciating. Promus collapsed to the ground, fighting for air and feeling a jagged hand clamp over his chest as his secondary heart registered the destruction of the primary organ. He tried to blink away the bright lights fogging his vision as his armour flooded his system with pain balms.

Promus tried to move his arms, but his body would not obey him, his nervous system paralysed by shock. The daemons shrieked with hateful laughter, bounding in to rend their suddenly disabled foe limb from limb.

He gasped in pain, his chest heaving with the hammer blow of his secondary heart kicking in. The dormant lung sac behind his main organs inflated and Promus sucked in a desperate draught of air.

He lifted his bolter and pulled the trigger.

The hammer slammed down on an empty chamber.

'Damn,' he choked, turning the weapon around to use as a bludgeon.

The first of the daemons leapt for him, jaws wide and hooked arms outstretched. He clubbed it away, but more came in a rushing tide of claws and teeth. Another flew at him, and Promus was too weak to stop it.

A brilliant silver-steel blade struck the daemon from the air with a perfect strike of razored metal.

Aoshun.

And then Nagasena was there, standing over him with the Dragon Sword held overhead in a classic challenge stance.

'You will not touch him,' Nagasena promised the daemons.

The sea of daemons parted before Ahriman and the towering creature Aforgomon had become. They dropped back in adulation, falling upon their knees and howling their blind, idiot devotion to the mighty creature. One head darted back and forth, spouting an insane chatter of meaningless gibberish, its beak snapping open and shut as though trying to bite back its words.

Ahriman's heqa staff vibrated with the power flowing to the surface. He tasted metal at the nearness of his gene-sire, a power that had kept itself dormant since

leaving the past of Old Earth.

'You have the power to draw Magnus from Lemuel?' he asked.

'No,' said Aforgomon, ***'but* you *will.'***

'What does that mean?'

'You will find out.'

The storms overhead raged with ever-greater power, a swirling maelstrom of colours undreamed. A mirror of the great Eye that seethed in the darkest arm of the galaxy. Power boiled in its depths, and its allure promised a time of endless invention, where stasis was anathema.

The vast figure of Magnus was little more than a memory of shadow, the faintest outline of something once magnificent. Lemuel floated at the eye of the storm, his stretched body taut with power it was never meant to touch, let alone contain.

Ahriman's steps carried him up towards his former pupil, as if an invisible staircase lay before him. Once, so blatant a use of his psychic powers would have horrified him, but defiance of gravity was the least of his abilities now. First tens, then hundreds of metres separated him from the ground.

Aforgomon's mighty avian wings bore it upwards alongside him, and the higher Ahriman climbed, the more apparent the full extent of what had been conjured here became. The winding paths of the crystal labyrinth stretched beyond the horizon to encircle the world. Who knew how many souls had been ensnared within its psychic web?

'My warriors,' said Ahriman. 'Are they alive?'

The lunatic head of the creature answered.

'Yes, no, none can say! Maybe all dead, almost certainly changed? Will a meeting happen? Oh, yes. The mordant one and the ones you betray. All will know the name of Ahriman.'

'Speak plainly, beast,' said Ahriman.

'It cannot,' said the other head. ***'The terrible truths contained within the Well of Eternity drove it entirely mad. It speaks truths, but every fragment of wisdom is inextricably woven with bitter falsehoods. It would take ten thousand lifetimes to unweave them.'***

'Then what use are you to me?' said Ahriman.

'That depends on what you are willing to embrace.'

Ahriman ignored the creature, knowing it could only speak to him in cryptic half-truths. He glanced down and saw the circle of embattled Imperial forces. They fought impossible odds, a handful of warriors at the heart of an unending horde.

These were brave warriors and did not deserve such a fate, but then he remembered the sight of the Wolves laying waste to Prospero, and any thoughts

of regret curdled within his breast. These men had stood in his way, and there could be no forgiveness and no mercy for those who opposed him.

Such would be Ahriman's mantra from this moment onwards.

The power within Lemuel is stronger than us.

The voice came from within Ahriman, and despite the warning, a comforting warmth spread through him at his father's presence. The heqa staff grew hot beneath his grip, its wood and adamantium core vibrating at a pitch almost too subtle to detect.

But it resides in human flesh. Remember that.

Lemuel drifted down towards them, ablaze from head to foot with aetheric fire. Ahriman hid his shock at how the remembrancer had changed. His form was barely human now, stretched taut and *thin* by the soul-shards within him. His bones were visible beneath the flesh, barely connected to one another beneath diminishing layers of fat and muscle. His skin was ravaged by the psychic inferno burning at his heart, flaking away from his skull in ashen particles.

Lemuel's gaze turned on Aforgomon.

'One of the neverborn dregs,' he said, his voice deep and resonant with secret knowledge. 'Tell me, Ahzek, what name did it give you?'

'Aforgomon.'

'Apt enough,' conceded Lemuel. 'But its true identity is *The One Who Comes At The Appointed Time.*'

'That is but one of my names,' said Aforgomon.

'It's the only one that matters,' said Lemuel, and a burst of blue fire shot from his hands. Aforgomon screeched as its feathered body caught light and glittering, oil-sheened fire burned its form. A cage of flame engulfed the daemonic creature and its powerful wings seared in the sorcerous flames.

Aforgomon writhed in agony, screeching as it battered the scorching bars of its immaterial cage.

'That's better,' said Lemuel. 'Now you are as your master wrought you.'

Ahriman held out his staff, and Lemuel smiled as he sensed the power held within.

'Ahriman,' said Lemuel. 'Have you come to restore that soul-shard to me?'

'You know I have not.'

'My son, I–'

'You are not my father,' said Ahriman. 'Not like this.'

'You know better than that,' said Lemuel. 'I *am* all your fathers. The vain, egotistical, loving, disparaging, nurturing and proud fathers. I am all of them, for no one, not mortal nor primarch, is ever the one without the others.'

Ahriman nodded. 'Magnus the Red could be all those things, yes, but he was so much more than any one facet. He was the perfect blend of heart and intellect,

and if he could sometimes be blinded by his own brilliance, then who am I to hold that against him?'

'Who indeed?' said Lemuel. 'For you are your father's son, and your path leads to the same end as his. None will dare gainsay you and none who voice dissent will be heard.'

'If you are truly Magnus, then you will come back with me.'

'To that forsaken world in the Eye? Why would I do that?'

'You will die if you do not.'

Lemuel laughed. 'Is that what you told the shard in your staff?'

'It is the truth.'

'No,' said Lemuel. 'It is not, and if that is what you believe, then your understanding of the Great Ocean is woefully lacking. I can live forever with the power I have now.'

Lemuel held out his hand. 'And with what you can give me, I can see to it that you live forever at my side.'

Ahriman held the staff tightly and said, 'I cannot, for the being you would become would not be my father.'

'The father you know is *dead,*' snapped Lemuel. 'Or had you forgotten? He died on Prospero with thousands of your brothers. These times, they call for a Magnus the Red unfettered by notions of conscience and the shackles of duty and responsibility. The wretched being you left behind is a hair's breadth from dissolution, trapped in the prison of his decaying mind and raving in his lunacy. You would have me return to *that?* I think not.'

'Then if you will not come willingly, I will drag you back by force,' said Ahriman, thrusting his heqa staff forwards.

A searing beam of light blasted towards Lemuel, more focused than any weapon forged by the Mechanicum. The remembrancer swatted it away, and flew at Ahriman with a sneer of contempt.

Ahriman threw up a kine shield. Empowered by the soul within his staff, it could have dissipated the energy from an orbital blast.

Lemuel smashed it asunder with a single blow.

Ahriman flew from the impact, barely retaining his grip on the staff. He soared up and away from the attack he knew must be coming, and barely avoided a flurry of blue spears of killing light.

He hurled bolts of flame from his fingertips.

Lemuel caught them all and fed the power into his body.

He burned with the brightness of a sun, a blazing avatar of a god amongst men. His bones creaked within his flesh, sinews straining.

'You cannot defeat me, Ahzek,' said Lemuel.

Coruscating flames rippled over the remembrancer's body, and his veins stood out like pale lightning against his drum-taut flesh. The skin across his chest split in a hairline crack, and star-bright blood shone from within.

Lemuel roared in pain, doubling up as he fought to contain the powers raging within him.

Ahriman remembered his father's – his *true* father's – words.

It resides in human flesh.

Ahriman flew back through the air, back towards where Aforgomon writhed in aetheric captivity. The creature was in agony, every touch of the fiery bars causing it unimaginable pain.

'Give me the power you promised,' said Ahriman.

Aforgomon pressed a clawed hand against the confines of its cage. The fire consumed the flesh on its bones, but millimetre by millimetre, the hand emerged from the flames. Blackened bones were all that remained, but it was enough.

Ahriman gripped Aforgomon's hand and he cried out as a flood of ancient knowledge flowed into him. Too fast to see anything other than infinitesimal fragments, all that had been and all that would ever be rushed through Ahriman.

He bucked in its grip, but the daemon's skeletal fingers clamped down hard.

No, Ahzek, said Aforgomon, its voice thundering in his skull. ***You do not demand my gifts and turn away from all I offer.***

Power burned through Ahriman, the power of the creatures born to the warp, birthed in blood by the dreams and nightmares of mortals. The moment his father's power had almost destroyed him in the Halls of Extinction had been but a taster for this moment, but this time he was not alone.

His father rose up within him, pouring from the staff and into every fibre of his essence. Ahriman felt himself pressed into the very frontiers of his flesh as Magnus the Red claimed him, a being of spirit newly returned to flesh.

Ahzek Ahriman could not contain Aforgomon's power and live.

But the Crimson King could.

Ahriman felt his body swell with the essence of a god.

He was no longer in command of his flesh. That duty and honour fell to his primarch.

Magnus waved his hand and the fiery prison enclosing Aforgomon vanished. The daemon was a shadow of its former self, a withered thing of broken wings and scorched flesh, yet its might was undiminished.

One head babbled meaningless doggerel.

'The ocean is polluted, a single flaw that draws the things that hunger for blood!' it screamed. ***'So great a work undone for so small a thing as vanity!'***

Lemuel circled to face him, the shards within him having mastered their pain.

His face contorted in rage. ‘Even with that thing’s help, you are not strong enough.’

‘Perhaps not,’ said Magnus with a beckoning gesture of challenge. ‘But unlike you, I am not alone.’

Fire erupted in the air around him, pink and blue and gold, but he was already in motion. Ahriman felt the strength of Aforgomon blend with that of his father, a potent mix of the primarch’s genius and daemonic energies. Such awesome power was intoxicating, and Ahriman wondered if such an alloying could ever be fully sundered.

Magnus caught the winds of fire and spun them about himself in a cyclone of blinding light. He hurled them back at Lemuel, who bellowed as he dissipated the flames with a shout.

Lightning blazed between them, but Magnus deflected every bolt. Ahriman screamed within his own flesh as he felt the repercussive agonies of such great power. Was this what Amon had suffered when he had borne the Crimson King’s soul on the Planet of the Sorcerers?

The three beings circled one another, power flashing between them in blitzing storms of aetheric energy. Burning fires, transformative energies, biomantic and malefic curses were unleashed and dissipated in a storm that cracked the world open. Sourceless chittering sounds echoed from the air and sleeping gods sighed.

Lemuel hurled his power heedlessly, eager to end this swiftly and draw out the soul-shard within Ahriman’s body. The strain that was taking was showing. Cracks spread in a glittering web of bleeding light all across Lemuel’s flesh.

‘How long do you think you can keep this up?’ taunted Aforgomon.

‘Long enough to drag what is mine from Ahzek,’ said Lemuel.

‘Think you so?’ said Magnus. ‘This body is stronger than the feeble flesh that bears you.’

‘Then I will shed it and take yours,’ roared Lemuel. ‘And when it wears thin with use, I will take another.’

‘Is that what you would become? A vampyre stealing flesh to house your spirit, moving from body to body as the years wear heavy on you?’

‘What else is there? Russ destroyed our body.’

‘There is union,’ said Magnus, holding out his hand. ‘Join with me and return to your sons. We will lead them again and forge our own path. Together.’

Lemuel sneered. ‘Have you seen what awaits on the World of the Nine Suns? You would house us in a withered spirit-corpse, trapped for eternity behind an unseeing eye and doomed to live through the actions of others? No, never that!’

A torrent of ferocious energy blazed from Lemuel’s eyes. It buckled the air between them, but Magnus was no longer there.

Instead, Aforgomon bore the brunt of the assault.

The daemon lord's body writhed in the flames, its twin heads screeching in agony as they burned. Lemuel's gaze swept left and right in search of his foe.

Magnus swooped up behind Lemuel and wrapped an arm around the remembrancer's neck. He plunged his other hand into Lemuel's back, reaching deep within him for what was rightfully his.

Lemuel screamed and his back arched in agony.

They fell from the sky, twin angels of fire locked in a battle for supremacy of their shared soul. The shards housed in Lemuel's body fought to hold on to the shell that contained them, but it was a fight they could not win.

Magnus slammed into the ground and the impact was the starfall of a celestial being cast from heaven. Dust and rock flew in all directions from the impact. Magnus, clad in Ahriman's flesh, stood over his foe, flesh aflame from the power flowing into him.

Blinding light rose from Lemuel's groaning body, a coruscating pyre of pellucid crimson fire, the very essence of Magnus' restored soul. He threw back his head and devoured the fire as it lifted him into the air. The storm raging overhead exploded outwards, and without its creator's will holding the dark necropolis of Tizca together, it began to collapse.

Blades of glass and blinding veils of dust fell in a glittering, choking rain. Magnus laughed to feel the power of his reunited soul once again.

Not yet complete…

But whole enough for him to taste what he had once been and could be again when his final soul-shard was restored to him.

Ahriman felt his father's fleeting temptation to keep his body for himself, to push his son out completely and live again in a new body of flesh.

'No,' said Magnus. 'Never that.'

He turned as Aforgomon landed behind him, the great daemon's frame bowed and hunched by the terrible hurts done to it. Magnus was not fooled; he knew the daemon could restore itself in time.

'Is this what you wanted?' asked Magnus.

'This was never about what* I *wanted,' replied Aforgomon, its voice hollow with pain.

'Then what was it about?'

'About what your son was willing to sacrifice to save you.'

'Too much,' said Magnus softly as he took in the destruction of the reflected Tizca and all that had befallen Ahriman's warriors since embarking upon their quest. 'I feel all that he has done, all he has seen and learned. It will be a pain in his heart for the rest of his life.'

'It will be his undoing,' promised Aforgomon.

‘Perhaps it will,’ replied Ahriman as Magnus relinquished control of his body and his father’s power receded once more into his heqa staff. ‘But not today.’

He looked up to see a city’s worth of debris falling from above, the unbound ruins of Lemuel’s grand stage – tens of thousands of tonnes of glass and rock that would crush anything left alive to dust.

Ahriman reached out with his mind, extending his will to touch the souls he had brought to this world as well as each artefact of significance to the Thousand Sons. Just as his father had done in Prospero’s last moments, he opened his mind and new-found power to them all.

‘Time to go home,’ he said.

And blinked.

The necropolis of Tizca fell with the sound of the world’s ending, an avalanche of broken glass and stone that had only recently been raised. Lemuel watched it fall with an aching sense of finality from the crater in which he and Magnus had landed.

He welcomed the rain of death.

His body was an inferno of scars worn on the inside of his flesh and bones. He couldn’t move, but perhaps that was for the best. Soon there would be no uncertainty, no more pain and no more despair.

He hoped he would meet Malika again.

Would she forgive him for all he had done?

Of course she would.

Malika had the biggest heart he had known. She would welcome him with open arms and they would spend eternity in whatever awaited him in the dreaming moments beyond his death.

‘I am coming, my love,’ he said, closing his eyes at the last instant before the debris crashed down.

The noise was deafening, a rising crescendo that went on and on until it seemed it would never end. Lemuel felt the ground heave at the terrifying impacts all around him. It seemed as though Nikaea were trying to shake him loose, but nothing of Tizca’s destruction touched Lemuel.

He opened his eyes and saw the crashing thunder of debris slamming down against a rippling barrier of psychic force. Lemuel watched as boulders the size of Legion tanks and shards of glass like vast guillotine blades shattered against the barrier. Everything ricocheted from it, falling away in a never-ending tide until, after what felt like an eternity, the roaring stopped and the seismic force of collapse was stilled.

‘What…?’ he murmured. ‘How…?’

Shapes moved in his peripheral vision, bloodied, battered and grunting with effort and pain. He heard their voices, guttural barks and growls. He heard

women speaking, but could not make out anything through their tears.

Though the effort drew a gasp of agony from the depths of his abused body, Lemuel forced himself upright. His flesh felt bruised all the way down to his bones, and they in turn were filled with broken glass.

'Fenrys hjolda! You were right, Rune Priest,' said a wet, malformed growl behind him. 'He's alive! I would have bet my spear he would be dead.'

Lemuel tried to turn, but a rough hand seized him by the scruff of his neck. Something bright flashed and a sharp blade pricked the skin at his neck.

'Then we finish the job,' said the owner of the blade.

He recognised the voice. Olgyr Widdowsyn.

'No,' said Bjarki's voice, exhausted beyond endurance by the cost of keeping the cascade of debris from obliterating them all. 'Release him. It is not his wyrd to die here, though I wish it were.'

Lemuel opened his mouth to speak, but Widdowsyn leaned over his shoulder and shook his head. The Wolf's face was streaked with blood and burns.

'You get to live, but you don't speak, daemonhost,' he said, pushing Lemuel over onto his stomach. Lemuel screamed in pain and rolled onto his back, searching for any sign of a friendly face but finding none.

The three Wolves stood implacable and unbowed, while Dio Promus lay bloodied on his back, his armour molten and part-fused to his ruined flesh. A waxen seal bearing a fragment of burned oath paper fluttered at his pauldrons. That Promus still lived was a miracle, but Lemuel had seen legionaries suffer the most grievous of hurts and endure.

The swordsman, Nagasena, lay unconscious at the edge of the crater, still gripping a gleaming sword tightly despite the terrible burns on his arms. Camille and Chaiya did their best to tend to his injuries, and Lemuel's heart soared to see them reunited. He raised a hand towards them. Chaiya whispered in Camille's ear and his former colleague looked over. Any thoughts of rekindled friendship were stilled by her look of utter hatred.

Lemuel looked away as Bödvar Bjarki knelt before him.

The Wolf reached out, and Lemuel flinched, expecting pain, but Bjarki simply placed a hand over his heart. He felt the chill touch of Fenris spread through him, and the Rune Priest shook his head in wonderment.

'This mortal is no daemonhost, not any more,' said Bjarki. 'The soul of the Crimson King is gone. And no other fiend will ever claim his flesh. This one is a *wyrd-wraith* now, forever illuminated from within against the darkness of the creatures of the Underverse.'

Bjarki rose and approached Promus, saying, 'Can you stand?'

'Stand? Why?' said the former Ultramarine with a voice utterly traumatised by pain.

‘Because you’ll need to look me in the eye when you answer my next question.’

Promus nodded slowly and Lemuel winced at the agony he saw in the warrior’s face as he used his shattered bolter to push himself upright. The lower portion of his right leg was missing, and he fell back with a grunt.

Bjarki nodded to Widdowsyn, who bent to assist the struggling warrior to his feet. Promus nodded his thanks as the Wolf helped him upright.

‘What is your question?’ asked Promus, meeting Bjarki’s cold and flinty gaze.

‘Is it true?’

‘Is what true?’

‘That you are a murderer of our kind,’ said Bjarki. ‘That you have taken the lives of brother legionaries loyal to the Allfather?’

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Promus.

‘Do not lie to me,’ said Bjarki, stepping in close to Promus, and though the wounded warrior was half a head taller, Lemuel saw he was the lesser of the two.

‘The creature with the red sorcerers,’ said Bjarki, placing a hand over Promus’ heart. ‘It told us what you have done. It smelt the guilt of murder upon you.’

Promus sneered. ‘A creature of the warp? You cannot trust anything such a creature might say.’

‘Ja, normally I would agree with you, but the best liars are those who hide their lies among the truth, and you have been lying to me since we met, Dio Promus. So tell me truthfully, what exactly is it you do for Malcador?’

Bjarki tapped the shredded length of oath paper fixed to his armour with wax imprinted with the Sigillite’s seal.

‘I know what *we* do for him, but I have to know what calling would be so great that a warrior of Ultramar would forsake the colours of his Legion.’

‘A calling you would never understand.’

‘Ah, yes, because I am just a savage from a death world?’

‘No, because your loyalty to your gene-sire would never permit you to do what I must.’

Bjarki almost laughed, but caught himself with a grimace of anger. ‘You have *no idea* what the Sixth Legion can do. Did Prospero teach you nothing?’

‘It taught me more than you know.’

‘Then tell me if what the creature said is true. And, remember, I will know if you lie.’

Promus met Bjarki’s gaze and Lemuel saw Promus’ realisation of the truth in the Rune Priest’s words. A lie would be unravelled in the space between heartbeats.

‘It is true,’ said Promus, ‘I have taken the lives of brother legionaries loyal to the Emperor.’

The horror of the answer drove the breath from Lemuel's chest. Even Bjarki, who had expected this answer, seemed shocked. The only response the Wolf could muster was a single question.

'Why?'

'I will not say,' said Promus.

'Why not?'

'Because I swore an oath to never reveal my duty,' said Promus with a burdened heart. 'An oath more binding than that I took before Lord Guilliman in the Praetorium of Macragge. One I cannot now break, even in the face of my executors.'

Bjarki said nothing, his head hung low over his chest and Lemuel saw he was weighing the consequences of what Promus had confessed.

'I am a loyal servant of Terra,' said Promus. 'That is all I can tell you.'

Bjarki gave a nod to Svafnir Rackwulf and said, 'No, that is not enough. Do you remember you once asked if I was to stand at your side and slay you if you turned traitor?'

Promus nodded. 'On Kamiti Sona.'

'Ja,' said Bjarki. 'I told you that we did not relish such tasks, but the Wolf King commanded us, so we obeyed.'

Promus opened his mouth to reply, but before he could speak, Svafnir Rackwulf rammed his spear through him. The barbed adamantium blade severed his spine and clove his sole functioning heart. Rackwulf twisted the haft of his weapon, and pushed it deeper until its barbed tip burst from the centre of Promus' chest.

Bjarki kept his eyes locked with Promus' and Lemuel felt something indefinable pass between them.

Rackwulf wrenched his spear free of the former Ultramarine and Promus fell forwards with a crash of armour. Lemuel climbed to his feet and limped towards Bjarki.

The Rune Priest turned as he approached.

'You think I was wrong?'

'No,' said Lemuel.

'I think I should kill you too, just to be sure.'

'You aren't going to do that.'

'No,' agreed Bjarki.

'Do you know why?'

Bjarki shrugged. 'Wyrd is strange like that. Some who die are not meant to follow their path to the end. Others who have done much to deserve to die endure.'

The Wolf lowered himself to the ground and sat back on his haunches, letting the exhaustion of the battle seep out of him in waves.

'We failed,' he said. 'In every way possible. The red sorcerers will restore their father and he will rise more powerful than ever before.'

Lemuel shook his head and bent to pull the tattered oath seal from Promus' armour.

'No, he will be less.'

'How so?'

'I had the soul of the Crimson King within me,' said Lemuel. 'I touched his thoughts and his fears. There is a piece of his soul he cannot yet reclaim, the very best part, I think. Without it he will have all the power of Magnus the Red, but without the good that once lay within him.'

Bjarki stood. 'You know this for certain?'

'I do,' said Lemuel.

'Then our mission is not yet done,' said Bjarki.

Lemuel turned the oath paper he had taken from the dead warrior before him and read the scorched remnants of his name and deeds.

'He was once an honourable man,' he said. 'And I shall honour him.'

Bjarki gripped his arm. 'You will return with us to Terra. The Sigillite must hear what you know, Lemuel.'

He shook his head.

'That is no longer my name,' he said.

He folded the oath paper and gripped it tight in his palm.

'Call me Promeus.'

Ahriman blinked.

Escaping Prospero's doom to the Planet of the Sorcerers had been an agonising fall through a maelstrom of howling madness, but the translation from Nikaea was like waking from sleep.

The grand stage of Tizca's dark mirror conjured by Lemuel was gone, but a storm yet raged around him. Ahriman let out an aether-hot breath and saw he stood in the last remains of a broken city of cyclopean menhirs and towering megaliths, a place that reeked of blood and death.

Tolbek and Sanakht looked around in wonderment at their new surroundings. Menkaura was with them once more, the seer down on his knees, clutching his head and weeping blood from his ruined eye sockets. Ignis stood over the fallen body of an orange-lacquered cybernetic, nodding as if he had foreseen this exact circumstance.

The warbands lost in the labyrinth were also returned with Ahriman, and he saw Onuris Hex, as well as Kiu and the others. Their auras were all but extinguished, and Ahriman wondered what dark corners of their souls had been

bared within the labyrinth? But such mysteries would have to wait, for he had brought them all from one world's ruin to another.

The Thousand Sons they had left behind stood at the perimeter of a circle of hard-packed earth enclosed by the ring of vast stones. Power billowed around them as they held back a world-ending tempest of oblivion with barriers of overlapping kine shields. None turned to acknowledge their arrival, every scrap of their attention focused on defying the oncoming armageddon.

Ahriman's breath caught in his throat as he saw what had become of his primarch in his absence.

'We were too late,' he whispered, and the words glittered on his breath before falling like dust from his lips.

The corpse of Magnus the Red sat locked within a throne fashioned from interleaved vines of gold. Amon knelt before his gene-sire, swathed in rags and clad in armour patched with rust and antiquity.

Ahriman moved towards the withered corpse of Magnus, but Tolbek stepped in front of him and placed a burning fist at the centre of his breastplate.

'You gave one of our own to a daemon,' said the Pyrae adept, his eyes eager for violence. 'I will not forget that, and neither will our brothers.'

'I did what had to be done,' snapped Ahriman, feeling the forces within his heqa staff pulling him onwards. 'And I would do it again. Now get out of my way.'

Tolbek held his arm a moment longer before releasing him.

'When the Warmaster's campaign is won, there will be a reckoning between us, Ahzek Ahriman,' promised Tolbek.

'So be it. Now move, I need to save our father.'

Tolbek stepped aside and Ahriman jogged towards the support throne and the slumped form of the primarch. Sanakht appeared at his side, and Ahriman shook his head.

'You too, Sanakht?' he said. 'Are you going to threaten me as well?'

'No,' said the swordsman. 'You had an impossible choice to make. Betray your brother or save our father. I could not have made that choice, but that is not what troubles me.'

Ahriman sensed evasion in Sanakht's words and said, 'Then what does?'

'The ease with which you made it,' said Sanakht. 'I wonder who else you might sacrifice to obtain what you want if the prize is great enough. Menkaura? Ignis? Me?'

Ahriman did not answer, and slowed his pace as they approached their father's golden tomb. Amon looked up, and Ahriman tried to hide his shock as he saw the equerry's ravaged features.

Ahriman had little idea of how long their quest had taken, but from the look of Amon, centuries must have passed. His features were like weathered oak, both eyes unseeing with opaque cataracts.

Despair touched Ahriman.

Were they already too late?

Was the Warmaster's rebellion already over? Had Terra fallen or were the armies of Horus shattered in defeat, licking their wounds in some backwater system?

'Ahriman? Is that really you?' said Amon, his voice little more than a parched desert whisper.

'It is I, brother,' he said as Sanakht knelt to help the blinded Amon to his feet. The equerry's face contorted in pain, and Ahriman remembered the terrible damage the daemon of dust in the guise of the Wolf King had wrought upon him.

Amon reached up and touched Ahriman's face, as if unwilling to yet believe he was real. He wept as his fingers made contact with a being of flesh and blood, and not false hope.

'I never dreamed you would return, brother,' said Amon.

'I am here,' replied Ahriman.

'Did you…?'

Ahriman held up his heqa staff, and the milky cataracts bled from Amon's eyes as the power of the Crimson King's soul radiated from the pale wood. Amon blinked and his eyes widened as he saw for the first time in who knew how long.

'Brother!' he cried and took Ahriman's hand in the warrior's grip, wrist to wrist. 'You are a wonder to me!'

'And you to me,' said Ahriman, looking up at the husked body of their father. 'I will hear of all that has happened in due time, but first…'

'Aye,' said Amon, turning and guiding Ahriman towards the throne.

From a distance, his father's condition had been terrible to behold, but up close the horror was even greater. Like a mummified body, the Crimson King was a revenant of ossified flesh, drained of all vitality. His once mighty body was shrunken and black, as though decaying from the inside out.

'Are we too late?' asked Sanakht, echoing Ahriman's earlier thought. 'Is he already… dead?'

'No,' said Ahriman. 'He yet lives, I am sure of it.'

Ahriman rose into the fifth enumeration, and pushed his mind down into the leather-tough flesh of his father's body. His outer skin was withered and long-dead, like the surface of an ancient and petrified tree.

Deeper he plunged, past necrotic and lifeless organs he could not identify, seeing highways of blood vessels and networks of sensory pathways beyond

anything he could have imagined. The craft of the Emperor's gene-wrights was masterful to behold, but he had no time to spend admiring their work.

Onwards he dived, sensing a pulse of life deep within the shell of his father, an ember on the verge of extinguishing.

+*Ahriman…?*+

The pulse of thought was so faint, Ahriman wasn't sure he had even heard it at first. He paused in his psychic voyage through his father's body and waited for the voice to come again.

+*Ahriman…?*+

+Yes! Father!+

+*Am I dead?*+

+No.+

+*I think… I think I was dying, yes?*+

+You were, but I am here now.+

+*Where did you go?*+

+To bring back your soul.+

+*My soul?*+

+Yes,+ said Ahriman, and allowed the soul-shards bound within his staff to flow outwards. They surged from within, roaring like a flood tide as they used him as a conduit.

Like attracts like.

Ahriman screamed as the combined aspects of the Crimson King poured through him to where they belonged. The power was immense, and Ahriman felt himself being pulled apart from within as they bloated his fragile psyche. For an instant he almost felt pity for Lemuel, a mere mortal whose fragile flesh had somehow managed to bear such a burden.

As though filling a well, the shards of Magnus' soul spread through his flesh as the most potent of panaceas. What it touched it renewed, and what it renewed was reborn. Like a great and powerful animal shaking off a long hibernation, the Crimson King shed the dust of ages.

Ahriman felt the last of the power contained within his staff bleed out and he gasped, pulling his mind back into his skull with a cry of pain. To have flown so close to the heart of a star would leave repercussions like nothing he had ever experienced before, but that was a price he would pay as often as necessary to renew his father.

He staggered away from the imprisoning throne, as the twisting vines of gold cracked and burned away like dust in the wind.

As above, so below.

The deathly hue drained from Magnus' skin and the bronzed, ruddy heat of his flesh restored itself. Atrophied muscles swelled with growth, becoming mighty

once again. A deep rumble built within the breast of the Crimson King and armour that was layered with a patina of verdigris and rust shone with the lustre of metal freshly forged.

His mighty head lifted and the lank, matted hair became lustrous once again – a mane of scarlet banded by a crown of gold.

Finally his eye opened, and Ahriman sank to the ground.

Tears fell with unabashed joy at the sight of his father's clear and lucid sight. The pupil swirled with colours undreamed and, even newly awakened, it saw further and deeper than Ahriman's ever would.

Further even, perhaps, than it had before.

Magnus rose from the support throne and it collapsed into broken shards, leaving him standing over them all, a god restored to his towering majesty. The primarch stood taller now, a being of limitless power unburdened by any notions of restraint or by weight of conscience. His soul was restored, but Ahriman knew that the best part of it, the true and loyal heart of him, remained lost.

Golden light blazed from him, and as it spread across the circle of menhirs, the storms beyond were stilled as the great will that had kept oblivion at bay set order upon his kingdom once again. Beyond the titanic stones, the world was remaking itself, its protean form given shape by the desires of the Crimson King.

The Thousand Sons turned from their labours, drained but elated to see their father once again – brighter, stronger and more energised than ever before.

They gathered in their hundreds to witness their father's rebirth, and Ahriman could only guess at how long it had been since they had seen him like this. Their steps were leaden, and he felt their exhaustion. They marched like captives newly freed from a lifetime of incarceration, or mindless automata cut from their command cortex.

Their souls had been pushed to the edge of despair, but with every step they took towards Magnus, more remembered his light and awoke. Hundreds of warriors surrounded Ahriman and his cabal, pressing their gauntlets against the battered plates of their armour, like pilgrims confronted by a saint or holy object.

'Ahriman,' said Magnus, and every one of the Thousand Sons turned to the source of their gene-sire's voice.

Ahriman stood as though drawn to his feet by a puppeteer's hand, and his brother legionaries parted before him. He and the warriors who had set out to restore the Crimson King marched through the newly created path towards him with their heads held high.

He reached Magnus and saw the mighty grimoire he had carried from this world was once again chained to his primarch's hip. He had no memory of taking the book to the surface of Nikaea, but here it was restored to his father.

Ahriman fell to one knee and bowed his head.

‘***No,’*** said Magnus. ***‘My sons, from this moment onwards you will never kneel to me.’***

Ahriman rose and looked up into his father’s face.

‘You saved me,’ said Magnus. ***‘All of you, and that is a debt I can never repay. Your faith and courage humbles me, but I must beg yet more of you.’***

‘Ask!’ cried Ahriman. ‘We are yours to command.’

‘The tides of the Great Ocean have revealed our course, the path we must take,’ said Magnus, his voice carrying to every warrior gathered before him. ***‘Horus gathers his forces for a final push on the solar system, and we will join him for the last great battle on Terra’s soil.’***

Long had Ahriman waited to hear the primarch speak of what the future held for the Legion. But Terra? The birthrock?

‘We will gather the vessels of our fleet and make all speed to rendezvous with the Warmaster. The hour is upon us where the Thousand Sons must join this fight, a war we wished no part in, and bring ruin upon those who have sought to humble us.’

Cheers spread through the assembled warriors, but Magnus was not yet done.

‘Make no mistake, my sons,’ he continued, ***‘the coming days will test us all. But cleave to this when the darkness presses in, and hope grows scarce – I do not fight for Horus, nor any of my fallen brothers. I do not fight for the primordial forces that would claim dominion over this galaxy. No, I fight to save the hope of a brighter future, the dream that began life when the first expeditionary fleets set sail upon the Great Ocean.’***

Magnus drew his golden khopesh and raised it high.

‘I fight with Horus only until we break open my father’s Palace! And when its gates are sundered and its vaults forced, I will reclaim the first and greatest shard of my soul held prisoner beneath it!’

The nine suns caught the gleaming edge of the blade, and threw out nine reflections of the primarch’s all-seeing eye.

Ahriman cheered himself hoarse to see his father so sure in his conviction, so vital and singular in his purpose.

Magnus reborn.

The Crimson King crowned in fire.

Magnus the Red is made whole, dragged back to the physical plane

In war, the result is an impostor.

Prospero's doom taught me that. My father will soon learn it as well. It is possible to fight with courage, honour and bravery, and still lose.

That war has no victors is a lesson as old as time, some might say, but something greater will arise from the Imperium's slow fall into ruin. Something everlasting.

The Orrery.

Knowledge is a continuum. Just as our ancestors presented us with the hard-won fundamentals of lore, so too must we, as its new guardians, reach out to those who come after us and ensure that this continuum remains unbroken.

The coming battle for Terra and the centuries of bloodshed sure to follow in its wake will fade from memory as death takes the last of those who fight in the flames. The truth of what Horus has unleashed will recede with each retelling, until a time comes when living remembrance yields to the simplest narratives of mythology.

The bloody edges of my brother's rebellion will be worn away, and the irresistible illumination of the victor's truth will banish ambiguity so that all that remains is a child's tale of good vanquishing evil.

I take it upon myself to preserve an authentic record of this time. The guardianship of its truth has to live on, but it will not be passed down by the brutalised hearts of those who witness mankind's cradle burn.

The libraries of Tizca represented the merest fraction of what the Thousand Sons knew – a sliver *of what* I *know. What I seeded in the ocean was to have been so much more: nothing less than the sum of all the knowledge that humanity once possessed.*

But Hawser had the truth of it when he spoke about the danger of gaps in mortal understanding. What solid footings were there for the Imperium when no one grasped the totality of what had been preserved and what had been lost?

The Orrery was to be my answer.

But the small perturbations we miss or ignore, tiny flaws we regard as inconsequential…

They have far reaching consequences.

AFTERWORD

Hands up, all of you who never thought you'd get to read this book?

If you could see me just now, you'd see I have my hand raised too (as are the hands of at least half the editorial staff at Black Library, I'm guessing…) Along the way, there were so many points where I felt like this story was never going to get finished. So many that it seemed *impossible* it ever would. That's a point I know a lot of authors, myself included, go through. The creation of a novel is a marathon rollercoaster ride of emotions and states of mind: feverish joy at its opening, the glorious potential of the book to be your *magnum opus*, the uphill battle to the midway point, the return of initial joy as that point is crossed, the eternal stretching of the last third, the excitement and increase in pace when the end is in sniffing distance…

And then the bewildering sense of disbelief that you've actually *done* it, you've finished the first draft! It's a heady mix of elation, sadness and relief. Now magnify all those emotions a thousandfold and you're somewhere in the region of what I was feeling when I was writing this book.

The Crimson King had a difficult beginning, what with it being nearly five years since I'd written its predecessor, *A Thousand Sons*. Plunging back into that book was a real pleasure – even if I do say so myself – remembering all the moments where I wrote a particular scene, crafted a certain line of dialogue or came up with an original twist on a known character. The Horus Heresy has moved on a lot since then, and other authors have taken the characters of the XV Legion onwards in new and exciting directions.

All of this made pulling the threads back together for this book quite a daunting task.

Given where the main narrative had reached, finding what the new story would *be* for the Thousand Sons was a trickier prospect than I expected. It needed to be a tale worthy of the main players and one that packed a big enough punch from the previous book. And it couldn't tread on any of the many tales already in flight.

This was taking a toll on my confidence in the direction the book was taking, as well as slowing my word count to a crawl. Which, as a lot of other writers will

tell you, has a cumulative, knock-on effect where the fact that you're not producing the words hits you hard enough to *keep* you from producing words. A vicious circle of a self-fulfilling prophecy, if you will.

I was struggling with this book. Struggling hard.

As I've said to many people at events, momentum is one of the key factors in how you get a book written. Firing up the enthusiasm and passion, and maintaining the word flow while you're on that roll, is essential to keeping the creative engine running. That momentum was failing me badly, and I considered myself lucky if I got more than a few hundred words done in a day. That was a new reality for me, and it meant that I began to fall out of love with the story and everything about it. It became a real struggle to open the file and try to get words down. Displacement activities became the norm, as did reading and rereading what I'd done in an attempt to kickstart the process once again.

Then, just to add to the pressure, I decided I was going to move my entire family across the Atlantic to take up a full-time position in Los Angeles. When it comes to organising my work and life, I'm normally pretty good at compartmentalising things so I can deal with whatever demands a portion of my brain-space. But, as it turns out, organising the moving of an entire family to another continent requires more than I had to give at that point. What with sorting out the hundreds of hoops we needed to jump through to get to the US, together with dealing with all the things that needed to be tied up before we left... I had next to nothing left to give to *The Crimson King*.

And when we got to LA, I had to figure out how to live in a new land, fit into a new workplace (which was much harder than I expected, what with having been my own boss for ten years and used to swanning about on my own schedule) and discover a new city while living in a new house with no furniture, phones, car, internet, or any of our personal touchstones. It was hard, not least because the idea of working all day and then coming home to start work on the book – and not spending time with my family after just uprooting them all – was just not an option. As anyone who has put off something they don't want to go back to for a long time knows: the longer you leave it, the harder it is.

When we finally got sorted with our furniture arriving and our growing familiarity with California, I hoped I'd be able to get started again, but that just didn't happen. The office in the temporary house we were renting was located in the basement, and a more dank, depressing, lightless space I can barely imagine. It put me in mind of the hellish scriptoria of the Imperium – a space that I just didn't want to go to every night.

So I didn't. For nearly a year.

Then we moved down to Venice, not far from the beach, and a place much more conducive to writing. But still I didn't get behind the keyboard.

But there comes a time in every writer's life where there has to be a bullet bitten, a saddle got back into. I read and re-read what I'd already written (around 65,000 words) and that's when the first rays of light began to break through the black clouds engulfing the novel. I read it and, to my amazement, I really *liked* it. What was there was *good*. I began to feel the same flush of excitement I had felt when I was planning the book in the first place. I'd forgotten a whole lot of the character arcs I had been planning, the payoffs I'd seeded earlier in the text, but they all came back in a rush – most of them better than I'd originally envisaged them. I broke out the index cards and started scrawling ideas, arcs and scenes in a feverish rush.

Then I started writing. Earlier in the year, I'd penned the novel *Magnus the Red: Master of Prospero*, and that had broken me back into the language and tone of the Thousand Sons as well as giving me a refresher on the Horus Heresy. So when it came to getting back into *The Crimson King*, the words started coming. Slowly at first, then with ever-greater speed as I started hitting all those payoffs I'd planned years ago when I first pitched the idea of the book. One by one, the big moments came and got knocked out of the park as I worked late into the night for the next two months.

And then it was done.

I don't think any book I've written (or ever will write) has given me the travails this one has. But, as in most arenas, the things that require the most effort, the most bloody-minded determination and sheer willpower to finish are often the ones that drag the best work out of us. I don't know if the book you've just read is my best work, but I'm fiercely proud of it and the fact that I managed to finish it at all, given the pressures surrounding its creation.

The Crimson King is crowned, and now with all the story threads and hooks I left in my wake, I need to figure out where and how to pay them off. I hope you enjoyed this novel, and to everyone who offered me encouragement along the way by asking if it was finished or coming soon, I offer my sincere thanks. Knowing that the readers really wanted this book was a huge boost to my see-sawing spirits through the course of its writing.

Thank you, one and all.

Graham McNeill
October 2016

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graham McNeill has written many Horus Heresy novels, including *Vengeful Spirit, New York Times* bestsellers *A Thousand Sons* and the novella *The Reflection Crack'd*, which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology, and the Primarchs novel *Magnus the Red: Master of Prospero*. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written a Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus. For Warhammer, he has written the Time of Legends trilogy *The Legend of Sigmar*, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award.

An extract from *Magnus the Red: Master of Prospero*.

The dust swirled like a miniature vortex in Atharva's palm, its composite elements spun by the whims of the planet's increasingly chaotic magnetic fields. It was reckless to remain in Zharrukin's ruins in the face of the oncoming magna-storm, but the Thousand Sons did not lightly abandon knowledge won by lost generations.

An ashen wind howled through the broken structures and collapsed ruins, as if in lament for the city's lost glories. It must once have been magnificent, the scale and plan of the remaining stumps of pitted marble suggestive of enormous constructions of polished stone and shimmering glass.

Zharrukin spread from the rugged haunches of the mountains, following the unnaturally straight groove of a wide river valley. A thousand years or more had passed since the city had been inhabited, and nature had reclaimed many of its ancient plascrete canyons and shattered thoroughfares.

The architecture was pre-Old Night, bespoke and without the modularity that would later typify the aesthetic of humanity's ultra-rapid expansion to the stars. Morningstar had been settled early in the golden age of exploration, and Zharrukin was one of its earliest cities.

'Was this where Morningstar's first king raised his capital?' Atharva asked as the dust danced in his hand. 'Why did your world alone stand untouched by the madness, but this city fall? Did your hubris bring you down, your greed? Or was it simply your time? Would that I could talk to you. What might you teach me?'

Atharva knew he was being overly sentimental, but the thought of knowledge being forgotten was as painful to him as a gunshot. He eased his mind into an elevated plane of thought – something the Legion's newly established cults, the Fellowships, were calling 'Enumerations'.

He'd read variants of the technique in the few ancient Achaemenian texts that had survived Cardinal Tang's purge of the Shi-Wu library, but only since leaving Prospero had he begun to perfect the technique. The Enumerations allowed him to focus perfectly on the task at hand, to better construct the mental architecture required to face any given situation.

Atharva studied the play of particles in his palm, watching them spin in ever more complex iterations. Iron oxide particles glittered, the remnants of something ancient and metallic, long since gone to dust amid the ruined city. He sought meaning in the patterns, echoes of the future woven within the random interactions of the dust's gyrations. Future-scrying had always been his focus, but sifting meaning from the Great Ocean's depths had always been challenging.

He glanced from the dancing red dust to the curvature of his left shoulder guard. Emblazoned in pale ivory upon crimson was the serpentine star icon of the Thousand Sons Legion.

Within it was the staring eye of his new Fellowship.

Athanaean.

The name felt new to him, yet spoke of ancient learnings, of a time when wizened academics pored over many quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore. Atharva was well aware of the mystical significance of names, and this one held a power all its own. The cult's teachings – and those of the Corvidae, the Pavoni and the rest – granted him power he had never dreamed possible. They had allowed him to achieve things all but unknown in the days before Prospero.

Before the Legion's rebirth.

He eased the barriers within his mind, allowing the Great Ocean to seep into his flesh. It flowed into his body like water pouring along a complex series of aqueducts, directed and shaped by the mental thought-forms of the third Enumeration.

He thrilled to the sense of the unknown becoming known, of the unseen and unwritten possibilities now being revealed. A tantalising image formed in his mind, a fleeting glimpse of a dreaming city at the top of the world, its spires molten as the world burned around it.

Was this Zharrukin's doom?

'What are you doing?' asked a muffled voice behind him, and the moment was gone. The flames fell away from his sight and he quelled the build-up of power within him, sighing as the mundane reality of the world reasserted itself.

'Thinking,' he said, opening the fingers of his gauntlet and letting the winds howling through the city blow the dust away.

Atharva wiped the last of it from his palm and turned as he rose to his full height in the centre of the windswept thoroughfare. The crimson of his bulky war-plate reflected the tortured light of the sky, making it shimmer as if with a veneer of oil.

An elegantly proportioned woman with charcoal-black skin stood before him, tightly wrapped in a brightly coloured robe of interlocking geometric patterns. He'd assumed her attire was ceremonial when they'd first met, but he had since learned it was culturally significant, indicating scholarly status within the peoples of the equatorial regions.

Behind her, a Legion Stormbird and two Cervantes-class transporters sat sheltered from the oncoming storm in the lee of a debris cliff. Their engines thrummed with noise and power, spooling up in readiness for launch.

'Conservator Ashkali,' he said. 'What can I do for you?'

'Niko,' she said. 'I think we've explored these old ruins long enough to dispense with formalities, don't you?'

'As you say,' he replied, both of them knowing he would never refer to her by her first name.

Niko Ashkali was Morningstar's senior conservator: a Terran by birth, but a native at heart. She led the excavations in and around the ruins of Zharrukin, and she had proven to be a thorough and perceptive academic. Her steel-grey hair was bound up in a patterned headscarf and the glare goggles of a rebreather obscured her features.

She pulled up her goggles, revealing startlingly green eyes set in deeply lined sockets. She shielded her gaze from the billowing dust and pointed to the sky.

'We have to evacuate the dig site,' she said, her voice muted by the dust-filter covering her mouth. 'Meterologicus says the magna-storm is at least an hour out, which probably means it'll hit us in ten minutes.'

Atharva lifted his gaze to the mountains in the east. The flaring detonations of a colossal magnetic storm marched over their summits. It was impossible to tell which way the planet's unpredictable weather systems would hurl them.

'The storm front is moving down to sweep across the plains,' he said. 'It will likely pass Zharrukin.'

'Or it could just as easily change course,' replied Ashkali. 'If it hits us, it's going to tear through this place in a blizzard of rogue magnetics and lightning. Anyone still here is going to die.'

Atharva was loath to leave Zharrukin, but to stay would be to risk the lives of the conservator's staff of archaeotechs and all they had unearthed thus far.

'You are correct,' he said. 'Prepare for departure.'

'What of your master? Is he still out there?'

Atharva hesitated before answering.

'He is. Get your people back to their ships.'

Ashkali hesitated before nodding and speaking into her rebreather's integral vox to issue the recall order. Atharva turned and walked back to the Stormbird and did the same, though he sent the order to his warriors via telepathic pulse. Within forty-five seconds, legionaries in crimson war-plate emerged from various areas of the ruins. Each was trailed by a bulk-servitor hauling the fruits of their excavations.

They boarded the Stormbird without a word, securing their findings in the hold before strapping themselves into the contoured benches along the gunship's inner hull.

Ashkali's people took longer to return, hurrying back to their waiting transports with barely disguised panic. The storm was getting worse, the sky flickering with radioactive sunspots and boiling atmospheric superstorms.

In the face of the worsening conditions, the conservator directed the evacuation with clipped efficiency, ensuring everything they had discovered was inventoried on her bronzed data-slate.

Phosis T'kar was the last to board, and the lieutenant paused as he reached Atharva. Dust caked the grooves of his armour and his aura was bellicose, his mind that of a scholar who attacks a work with brute-force reasoning. His methodology wasn't pretty, but it got results.

'Where is he?' he asked.

'He is not here,' replied Atharva, watching the storm descend on the far reaches of Zharrukin.

'That's not what I asked.'

'I know.'

'He should be here.'

'Yes, indeed he should.'

'Then where is he?'

Atharva did not answer, lifting his gaze to the mountains as the storm struck the earth beyond the edge of the city. Raging plumes of lightning-shot dust and debris were hurled hundreds of metres into the air, arcing over the city. A mushroom cloud of fire erupted from its shattered outskirts. Another swiftly followed, rubble lifted high by twisting currents of air and torsioning magnetics. A harsh, metallic-tasting wind blew hard from the mountains, making the mechanics of his war-plate hum in protest.

'We should be in the air,' said Phosis T'kar.

'He will be here. And if he is not, this storm will not trouble him.'

'You can't know that. What do any of us really know about him? What he can do or what he can endure? We barely know him.'

Atharva did not answer. That Phosis T'kar was right made him only more reluctant to admit to his ignorance. The Stormbird vibrated with potential, the pilot keeping it on the ground with a light touch, ready to lift off in an instant.

'Give the order,' said Phosis T'kar.

'Not yet.'

The tallest spires of Zharrukin swayed and groaned, the reinforcement within the stone tearing as alternating fields of powerful magnetics twisted them. Stone and steel peeled from buildings and spun away into the storm as searing winds buffeted the gunship. Dust raged within the Stormbird's troop compartment, swirling in vortices of geomantic significance.

The vox-bead in his helmet chirruped: an incoming message from Mistress Ashkali.

'*Master Atharva! We must take off. Right now!*'

He nodded and said, 'Go. Get out of here. We will be right behind you.'

'*See that you are!*'

The two Cervantes-class transports lifted into the air on plumes of jetfire, swaying and lurching wildly, as if the storm winds actively sought to prevent their

escape. The first craft took off in the lee of a shattered structure that sheltered it from the worst of the winds. The pilot feathered the engines and Atharva lost sight of it as rusted-ochre clouds closed in.

The second craft was not so lucky.

It twisted as a magnetic squall pulled its starboard wing down and buckled the metal of its hull. Ultra-rapid polarity shifts swung it around like a leaf in a hurricane. It flipped over onto its side, hurtling towards the ground and certain destruction.

Atharva slammed his mind into the second Enumeration.

Raw kine energy flowed through him.

He gripped the faltering transport with his power.

+Help me!+ he cried, the words blurted in a psychic shout.

Phosis T'kar was at his side an instant later, hands extended as he too unleashed his power. Atharva's lieutenant was a practitioner of the kinetic arts, and his sigil of the Raptora cult glittered in the flickering lightning.

Together they halted the transport's tumbling fall.

Atharva and Phosis T'kar rolled their wrists in perfect concert, moulding the kine power to their will. The transport mimicked their movements, rotating like a designer's schematic being haptically manipulated. Its engines flared as the pilot fed every scrap of power to them.

+Release!+ said Atharva.

He and Phosis T'kar relinquished their hold on the transport.

It shot skywards like a stone from a sling.

Bone-deep repercussive pain surged through Atharva's flesh, pain he would endure tenfold later. He let out a charged breath and stepped from the Stormbird's ramp. He read Phosis T'kar's confusion.

'What are you doing?' asked his lieutenant. 'Get back on board.'

'Return to Calaena immediately,' replied Atharva through bloodied teeth. 'Assist the Fourth Legion elements in the evacuation. I will rejoin you when I can.'

Phosis T'kar shook his head and pressed his palm against the closing mechanism. 'I'm closing up, but we aren't leaving without you and the primarch.'

Atharva saw the determination in Phosis T'kar's aura and knew that any argument he might make against this course of action would be futile.

'Then I will attempt to be quick,' he said.

Hurricanes of abrasive dust flensed the paint from his armour in silver streaks as he turned towards the city where his master awaited.

If he is still alive.

Could any being survive conditions so inimical to life?

The clouds parted and a towering figure wreathed in multi-coloured fire emerged from the storm in answer.

He was a giant in crimson and gold, a warrior and scholar in one. His golden war-plate had been crafted by the finest armourers of Terra, a masterpiece of curling horns, sculpted muscles, carved lions and the finest scriptwork. A kilt of leather hung to his knees, and a hook-bladed sword crafted from Prosperine silksteel was belted at his waist next to a colossal tome of psychic lore.

+My lord,+ said Atharva, using his psychic voice.

Magnus the Red was wrought from wrath and wonder, his face a protean blend of features that Atharva had never been able to entirely fix in his mind. A disconcerting attribute in a leader, one that would take some getting used to.

Atharva wasn't sure he was there yet.

The psychic fire of the primarch's magnificent aura kept the storm's fury at bay. Magnus might have been strolling through Tizca's sculpture gardens, for all the tempest affected him. A trio of servitors followed him, each hauling a high-sided grav-sled.

+Cutting it a bit close, are you not?+ said Atharva.

The primarch looked up, as if he hadn't noticed the storm at all.

+I had not completed my work,+ replied Magnus.

Click here to buy *Magnus the Red: Master of Prospero*.

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